Sulfur 40

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Editorial Assistant	KURT LINDEMANN

Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan

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COVER: *Paris Is White (for Edmond Jabès)* by Irving Petlin, Oil and Pastel on Linen, 31½" x 78¾", 1995–96, courtesy of Kent Fine Art, NYC.

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PHILLIP FOSS

A HISTORY OF TREES

I was unable to assimilate the concept of partial death.

Thus in the governance of names, provinces are created
isolating degrees of amorous extension in regard to light.

~

I internalized the fire in decay.
I was cumbersome.
They said, each night is divided into four winds.
In structure I was hope.

Having fallen, he is risen;
having been buried, he is born;
having been burned, he is translated;
having been translated, he is ash.

~

I was unified in crescendo, dispersed as ovum, dissipated in
[anger.
I am not received in rain or consciousness:
A Pleistocene mind craves dissension.

How does one determine the birth of a tree?

What is compelling is the relative sponge quality of shadow:
with confusing frequency song articulates
with the empirical absence of a bird.

~

I was prior to division.
I was seen by women as a raven's beak.
I am manifested in mutation.

Why is light absent from any equation?

This is often dismissed as the deafness
accompanying extended intercourse with any explosive
– a symptom of disruption of the eyes' fluids.

~

I know the craving for ash;
The nausea of milk;
The bewilderment of defacement.

Thus, having assigned to memory the inhabitant names of
all
[forests,
the novice is bewildered by the profusion of seed.

~

Stone is my allure.
Absence is my countenance.
Narrative defines neurosis.

Trees do not actually feed on corpses,
though this is an abused solace.
Most interment is an easement.

~

Death is de-unification: the pastoral removed from oak.
I ate excrement.
I believed that light illuminated.

Equally blind, equally blind.

Sometimes a profuse growth is disguised by numerous names.
Hedge, bois de arc, osage orange are examples.
Frequently, the culture of the namer precludes capture.

~

I am lame of mouth.
I am blind of hand.
I am, in structure, erudition.

Why is soil present in each sermon?

There is a pervasive ignorance regarding trees
and their relationship to breathing.
Trees have no lungs.

~

I am the suffocator of insects.
I am Shudder.
I am the woman coveting the smallest waist.

However, deficits in soil, moisture, light, and slope
define the failure of enlightment.

~

I believed I was intoxicated, when only disembodied.
I constructed myself to be prestigious.
I was enamored by shores in erosion.
I was imprisoned to my tongue.

Birch bark, when properly sewn and sealed,
is ideal for the construction of canoes or books
– relative vehicles of destination.

I have not lived in event.
I have not suckled on a mare.
I have not killed an animal.
I have not lied.

One must concede, however, that canoes
are capable of transporting both brains and asses.
Thus distinguishing vessels may well be errant.

~

If I lie, it is to release charm.
If I have sinned, it is to discard the infectious.
If I have fallen, it is merely a feint, to facilitate killing.

Species which produce consumables are the most often
assaulted;
those projecting barrenness or offensiveness reside
complacent.
This is effective as either affectation or deceit.

~

I am a woman's voice
explaining the necessity of washing the dead.
I was buried in the sea.

Hardwood are well suited for artificial limbs.
Limbs of some species produce excellent bows.

~

I am false.
I am the falsetto voice of the bull.
I am a strand of hair on the forest floor.

Grain is respectively a liability and an asset.
Fiddlebacking scatters light.
Ebony, apparently, consumes most light.
Cedar, when constantly assaulted by wind, barber-poles,
though the countenance deceives in linear facade.

~

I am a lost ivory broach; breast;
a transparent insect egg floating on a pond.

The tamarack, although growing needles instead of leaves,
is deciduous not evergreen.
This deception, of dropping its needles in autumn,
is viewed by the populace as the work of a dead pine
and the tree is dropped and blocked for firewood.

~

Who will drink the sediment from the blue bottle?
Who will swallow the gall stone?

Historically, all trees have been viewed as sacred;
all trees are wood.
Wood, therefore, is profane.

~

By what manner is time architectured?
What is the idealized structure of red?

Certain resins are odoriferous, others audacious.
Others, placed on the flesh and ignited, burn cool.

~

Who rectifies the disputations of memory?
Who is luck?

It is courting catastrophe to burn the wood of trees struck
[by lightning.
Violence, like the progressive falling of trees in an icestorm,
[is non-causal.

~

Who has sole custody of concept?
Why am I evangelized to convert to vulgar methodism?

Gods' countenances are frequently found
in the vagaries of disinterred black locust roots.

~

My name is Caprice.
My name is Folly.

Though no absolute tests are quotable,
fifty percent of a tree's mass is subterranean.
In thus positing a mirror balance,
the compositional weight of sky is neglected.

~

Though asleep, I continue in oratory;
though motionless, I consume.

Certain men have chosen to end their lives residing in trees.
These are primarily aerial hermits or the objects of
[hanging.

~

Who enumerates the strictures of barbarism;
Who proselytizes the compassion of the rookery?

Death by hanging does not affect the growth
pattern of the tree's limb because the body

rapidly loses moisture and becomes a wind chime.

~

What is the deaf sign for sound?
What is a conductor's sign to inflict silence?

Some cottonwoods, when cut,
have arteries in their core which hemorrhage.

~

What are the irrevocable mathematics of the heart;
what is each man's allotment of words?

Prior trees can become fossilized.
They then revert to "A History of Stone."

~

I have created the history of trees;
I have intentionally shuffled the strata of stone.

Through dendrochronology it was determined that the
[universe is flat:
One can thus hurl a projectile and it will not return.

~

I see my body asleep in a nightscape
punctuated by heads of glowing datura.
This is still life.

Boomerangs were not intended to return,
but to create atmospheric turbulence
conducive to rain or mental health.

~

The structure of my body
is identical to that of a jacal hut.
Thus, from myself, I cannot escape.

The only woman he desired was a mannikin.
This was attributed to finish.

~

Who records lock time?

The two hundred year old core of a bristlecone
is materially indifferent from yesterday.

~

Can the image of a snake represent a river?
Can a spiral represent a spring;
An eye, a god;
A leaf, the blood stream?

Some ancients, disemboweled by fire,
afford a space large enough to house a family.
This also applies to either gods or animals.

~

I cannot distinguish between what I have thought
and what I have created;
between what I have dreamt
and what I have whispered.

Each specie of tree makes unique sounds.
Though there are no published lexicons,
the overheard vocabularies simulate breath,
approximate pain.

ANDRE BRETON

A GREAT BLACK POET

(Tr. from the French by Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman)

April 1941. Blocking the view, affixed to the beach by madrepores and visited by surf—at least the children had the playground of their dreams to romp in all day long—a ship's carcass in its very fixity provided no respite to the exasperating impossibility of moving about other than with measured steps in the space between two bayonets: the Lazaret concentration camp, in the harbor of Fort-de-France. Released after a few days, with what voracity did I plunge into the streets, seeking whatever still novel experience they could offer, dazzling markets, the hummingbirds in voices, the women whom Paul Eluard had described, upon returning from around the world, as more beautiful than any others. Soon, however, another shipwreck was looming, threatening to again block the whole horizon: the city itself was adrift, deprived as it were of its essential parts. Shops, and everything in their windows, took on a disquieting, abstract character. Activity was a bit slower than need be, noise too clear as if through beached debris. In the subtle air the continuous ringing, far off, of an alarm bell.

It is under these circumstances that, apropos of buying a ribbon for my daughter, I happened to leaf through a periodical on display in the haberdashery where the ribbon was sold. It was, under an extremely unpretentious cover, the first issue of a review called *Tropiques* which had just come out in Fort-de-France. Needless to say, knowing the extent to which ideas had been debased in the last year and not unfamiliar with the lack of scruples characteristic of police reactions in Martinique, I approached this periodical with extreme diffidence. . . I could not believe my eyes: for what was said there was what had to be said and was said in a manner not only as elegantly but as elevatedly as anyone could say it! All the grimacing shadows were torn apart, scattered; all the lies, all the mockery shredded: thus the voice of man was in no way broken, suppressed—it sprang upright again like the very spike of light. *Aimé Césaire,* such was the name of the one who spoke.

I shall not pretend that I did not at once take some pride in the fact that what he expressed was in no way unfamiliar; the names of the

poets and authors he referred to would have been in themselves sufficient evidence; but even more the tone of these pages rang true, demonstrating that a man was totally engaged in an adventure while having at his command all that was required to establish something not only of an esthetic but of a moral and social nature—or better, to make his intervention necessary and inevitable. The texts which accompanied Césaire's indicated persons with generally the same tendencies and whose thinking fully coincided with his own. In complete contrast to the writings with a masochistic, not to say servile, propensity that had been published in France in recent months, *Tropiques* persisted in opening up a royal road. "We belong," Césaire proclaimed, "to those who say no to darkness."

This land he was revealing and which his friends helped reconnoiter, it was my land too, yes, it was *our* land which I had wrongly feared obliterated by darkness. And one could feel that he was revolting and even before becoming more acquainted with his message, one noticed, so to speak, that from the simplest to the rarest, all the words processed by his tongue had been stripped, hence allowing that climax in concreteness, that unfailingly major quality of tone by which one can so easily tell the great poets from the lesser ones. What I learned that day was that the verbal instrument had not gotten out of tune in the tempest. This had to mean that the world was not in perdition: it would regain its soul.

By one of those flukes characteristic of the most auspicious moments, the West Indian haberdasher soon identified herself as the sister of René Menil who was, along with Césaire, the main driving force behind *Tropiques*. Her mediation reduced to a minimum the conveying of the few words I scribbled in haste on her counter. Indeed, less than an hour later, after looking for me all over the streets, she gave me an appointment arranged by her brother. Menil: genuine culture in its least ostentatious form, impeccable restraint, but nevertheless nerve with all its tremoring currents.

And the next day, Césaire. I recall my first quite elementary reaction at finding him of a black so pure and even more unnoticeable at first sight because he was smiling. Through him (I already knew it, I see it and everything will confirm it later), human essence is heated to a point of maximum effervescence in which knowledge—here of the highest order—overlaps with magical gifts. In my eyes his emergence, and I do not mean merely that day, in a form sheerly his own, takes on the value of a *sign of our times*. Thus, defying single-handedly an era in which we appear to be witnessing the general abdication of the mind, in which nothing appears to be created except for the purpose of perfecting the triumph of death, in which art itself

threatens to congeal in obsolete schemes, the first revivifying new breath capable of restoring confidence comes from a black. And it is a black who handles the French language in a manner that no white man is capable of today. And it is a black who guides us today into the unexplored, establishing along the way, as if by child's play, the contacts that make us advance on sparks. And it is a black who is not only a black but *all* of man, who conveys all of man's questionings, all of his anguish, all of his hopes and all of his ecstasies and who will remain more and more for me the prototype of dignity.

Our meetings, in the evenings, after his high school classes (which were at that time focusing on Rimbaud) in a bar turned into a single crystal by the outside light, the gatherings on the terrace of his house made even more enchanting by the presence of Suzanne Césaire, who radiated like flambé punch, but even more an excursion into the heart of the island: I shall always see us, without any other landmark to navigate through an ocean of delirious vegetation than the large, enigmatic balisier flower which is a threefold heart throbbing on the tip of a spear, leaning dangerously from very high over the abyss of Absalom as if over the very crucible in which poetic images are transformed when powerful enough to shake the world. It is there, under the auspices of that flower that the mission, assigned to man today, of breaking violently with the modes of thinking and feeling which eventually render his existence impossible took on imprescriptible form. That once and for all I was confirmed in the idea that nothing will do short of lifting a certain number of taboos, of finally eliminating from human blood the deadly toxins fostered in it by the (let's face it) lazier and lazier belief in a beyond, the esprit de corps absurdly linked to nations and races, and (supreme abjection) the power of money. Inevitably, for the past century, it has devolved upon poets to split open that armature which stifles us, and it is significant to note that posterity tends to consecrate only those who have taken this task the furthest.

That afternoon, facing the luxurious opening of all the floodgates of greenery, I truly valued a feeling of total communion with one of them, of knowing him above all as a man of will and of not distinguishing essentially his will from my own.

I also valued having solid evidence that he was a person of total achievement: a few days earlier he had given me an offprint of his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* from a small Parisian journal in which the poem must have passed unnoticed in 1939, and that poem is nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times. It brought me the rarest of certainties, one which can never be attained by oneself: its author had gambled on everything that I had

ever believed in and he had, unquestionably, won. The stakes—taking into account Césaire's specific genius—were our common conception of life.

To begin with one will find in his poetry that luxuriance of movement, that at times gushing, at times showering, exuberance, that ability to constantly and deeply stir the affective world—all traits characteristic of authentic poetry in contrast to the fake poetry, poisonous would-be poetry, constantly proliferating around it. *To sing or not to sing,* that is the question and there is no salvation in poetry for someone who does not *sing,* although the poet is expected to do *more* than sing. And needless to say that when one who does not sing resorts to rhyme, fixed meter and other bogus devices, he will only fool the ears of Midas. Aimé Césaire is first and foremost one who sings.

Once that first absolutely necessary but not sufficient condition is fulfilled, a poetry worthy of its name is measured by the degree of abstention, of *refusal,* it implies and that negative component of its nature must be maintained as essential: it balks at tolerating anything already seen, heard, agreed upon, at using anything already used except when diverting it from its previous function. In this respect, Césaire is one of the most demanding poets not only because he is probity itself, but because of the extent of his culture, the quality and breadth of his knowledge.

Finally—and here, to remove any doubt brought about by the fact that, exceptionally, *Notebook of a Return* is a poem "with a theme," if not "a thesis," I specify that I am referring just as much to the poems of a different tenor that followed it—the value of Césaire's poetry, as with all great poetry and all great art, rests principally in the power of transmutation that it brings into play: namely in turning the most discredited materials, including even ugliness and servitude, into not just gold or the philosopher's stone but into freedom itself.[1]

The gift of song, the capacity for refusal, the power of extraordinary transmutation that I have just mentioned cannot be idly reduced to a handful of technical secrets. All that one can legitimately say is that all three find the largest common denominator in an exceptional, and until further notice, irreducible intensity of emotion confronting the spectacle of life (to the point where one is moved to change it). At most, critics are permitted to say something about the conflicting aspects of the formation of the personality in question and to bring out the striking circumstances of that formation. Unquestionably in Césaire's case it would *for once* lead us, at full gallop, away from the path of indifference.

In this respect, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* is a unique, irreplaceable document. The very title, as under stated as it is, aims at placing the reader at the core of the conflict which most affects the author, a conflict which he must, at all costs, transcend. The poem was written in Paris, after Césaire had just left the École Normale Supérieure and was about to return to Martinique. His native land, yes, how could one resist the call of this particular island, who would not succumb to its skies, its siren-like beckonings, its language oh so cajoling? But in no time at all darkness encroaches: one need only put oneself in Césaire's place to understand what assaults this nostalgia must sustain. Behind this floral design there is the wretchedness of a colonized people, their shameless exploitation by a handful of parasites in defiance of the very laws of their mother-country and without any qualms about dishonoring it; there is the resignation of this people, geographically disadvantaged by being a mere scattering of islands here and there. Behind all of this, only a few generations back, there is slavery and here the wound reopens, yawning with the whole width of a lost Africa,[2] with ancestral memories of abominable tortures, with the awareness of a monstrous and forever irreparable denial of justice inflicted upon an entire collectivity. A collectivity to which the departing poet belongs body and soul, as enriched as he may have been by all the teachings of the white world and thereby at that moment all the more torn.

Quite naturally the *Notebook* becomes an arena for revendication, bitterness, sometimes despair, to compete in, and the author opens himself to the most dramatic taking stock. His revendication, one can never point out enough, is the most legitimate in the world, so much so that the merest consideration of justice should prompt the white to grant it. But we are still a long way from that, even if we are beginning to put it timidly on the agenda: "In the former colonies, which will fall under a new regime and whose evolution towards democracy will become an international issue, democracy will have to put an end not only to the exploitation of colored people but to the social and political 'racism' of the white man."[3] One awaits with equal impatience the day when, outside these colonies, the great mass of colored people will no longer be insultingly segregated and restricted to inferior jobs or worse. If this expectation is not met by the international settlements that will come into play at the end of the present war, one might be forced to endorse, once and for all and with all that it implies, the opinion that the emancipation of colored people can only be brought about by themselves.

However, as fundamental as Césaire's revendication appears to be, to limit its implications to the immediate would mean reducing its

scope unforgivably. What I find invaluable in it is that it constantly transcends the anguish a black associates with the fate of black people in modern society, and that, becoming one with the anguish of all poets, artists, and bona fide thinkers, but adding to it the bonus of verbal genius, it encompasses the condition allotted to *man* by that society even to its unbearable, but also infinitely amendable, dimensions. And here comes to the fore in bold type what surrealism has always considered as the first article of its charter: a deliberate will to deal the coup de grâce to that which one calls "common sense (which does not stop short of calling itself "reason"), and the imperious need to do away with the deadly division in the human spirit in which one component has managed to give itself complete license at the expense of the other, whereas the very suppression of the latter will inevitably end up exalting it. If slave traders have physically disappeared from the world stage, their vile spirit is undoubtedly still at work in the sense that our dreams become their "piece of ebony," more than half of our nature stolen by them, that cursorily-considered cargo to this day barely good enough to rot in the hold of their ship. "Because we hate you, you and your reason, we claim kinship with dementia praecox, with the flaming madness of persistent cannibalism... Put up with me, I won't put up with you." And suddenly this transfiguring gaze, a bluish fuzz on the embers, like the no longer fallacious promise of a redemption: behold the one Césaire and I see as the greatest prophet of times to come, I mean Isidore Ducasse, Count of Lautréamont: *"Lautréamont's poetry, beautiful like a writ of expropriation...* Into lyrical and pallid strewings—like the fingers of the tropical pear tree when they fall in the gangrene of evening—he piles up the death trumpets of a laughable philosophy which raises, to the dignity of wonder of a hierarchized world, man, feet, hands and navel—a howling of fists against the barrier of the sky... The first to have understood that poetry starts with excess, disproportion, quests deemed unacceptable, amidst the great blind tom-tom... up to the incomprehensible shower of stars."[4]

Aimé Césaire's voice, beautiful like nascent oxygen.

NOTES

1 I did not wait to read this statement (published in *Lettres françaises* #7-8, February 1943) in order to embrace its opposite: "I see poetry essentially as a form of writing which, in compliance not only with the rules of prose but with other rules specific to it, number, rhythm, regular assonance, must nevertheless surpass it in power... Thus I demand that poetry possess all the qualities of prose, in the first place: nakedness, precision, clarity. The poet must aim at expressing all and only what he has in mind. Ultimately nothing unutterable, hinted at, no evocative images, no mystery..." Roger Caillois, often better inspired, makes here a perfectly Philistine statement.

2 Referring to the observations of European navigators at the end of the Middle Ages, Léo Frobenius writes: "When they arrived in the Bay of Guinea and landed at Vaida, the captains were surprised to find there well-designed streets, lined, for several miles, by double rows of trees: for many days they moved through a countryside covered with magnificent fields, populated by men clad in dazzling cloths of which they themselves had woven the fabric! Further south, in the kingdom of the Congo, a swarming crowd, dressed in 'silk' and 'velvet,' large states, well-organized down to the smallest detail, powerful sovereigns, prosperous industries. Civilized to the quick!" (Cited in *Tropiques* 5, April 1942).

3 Pierre Cot: "The different kinds of democratic constitutions" *(Le Monde libre* #2, December 1943).

4 Aimé Césaire: "Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont" *(Tropiques* 6-7, February 1943).

New York, 1943

ADRIENNE RICH

CHAR

1

There is bracken there is the dark mulberry
there is the village where no villager survived
there are the hitlerians there are the foresters
feeding the partisans from frugal larders

there is the moon ablaze in every quarter
there is the moon "of tin and sage" and unseen pilots
dropping
explosive gifts into meadows of fog and crickets
there is the cuckoo and the tiny snake

there is the table set at every meal
for freedom whose chair stays vacant
the young men in their newfound passions
(Love along with them the ones they love)

Obscurity, code, the invisible existence
of a thrush in the reeds, the poet watching
as the blood washes off the revolver in the bucket
Redbreast, your song shakes loose a ruin of memories

A horrible day. . .Perhaps he knew, at that final instant?
The village had to be spared at any price. . .
How can you hear me? I speak from so far. . .
The flowering broom hid us in a blazing yellow mist. . .

2

This war will prolong itself beyond platonic armistices. The implanting of political concepts will go on amid upheavals and under cover of self-confident hypocrisy. Don't smile.Thrust aside both skepticism and resignation and prepare your soul to face an intramural confrontation with demons as cold-blooded as microbes.

The poet in wartime, the Surrealistes' younger brother
turned realist: *the village had to be spared at any price*
all eyes on him in the woods crammed with maquisards ex-
pecting him to signal to fire and save their comrade
shook his head and watched Bernard's execution
knowing that *the random shooting of a revolver*
may be *the simplest surreal act* but never
changes the balance of power and that real acts are not
[simple
The poet, prone to exaggerate, thinks clearly under torture

knowing the end of the war
would mean no end to the microbes frozen in each soul
the young freedom fighters
in love with the Resistance
fed by a thrill for violence
familiar as his own jaw under the razor

3

Insoluble riverrain conscience echo of the future
I keep vigil for you here by the reeds of Elkhorn Slough
and the brown mouth of the Salinas River going green
where the white egret fishes the fragile margins
Hermetic guide in resistance I've found you and lost you
several times in my life You were never just

the poet appalled and transfixed by war you were the maker
of terrible delicate decisions and that did not smudge
your sense of limits You saw the squirrels crashing
from the tops of burning pines when the canister exploded
and worse and worse and you were in charge of every risk
the incendiary motives of others were in your charge
and the need for a courage wrapped in absolute tact
and you decided and lived like that and you
held poetry at your lips a piece of wild thyme ripped
from a burning meadow a mimosa twig
from still unravaged country You kept your senses
about you like that and like this I keep vigil for you.

CHAR: Italicized phrases and some images from *Leaves of Hypnos*, the journal kept in 1942-1943 by the poet René Char while he was a commander in the French Resistance; and from some of Char's poems. I have drawn on both Jackson Mathews' and Cid Corman's translations of Char in integrating his words into my poem. Char joined the Surrealist movement late and broke with it prior to World War II. It was André Breton who said, "The simplest surrealist act consists of going down into the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random."

VITEZSLAV NEZVAL

SHIRT

(TR. FROM THE CZECH BY JEROME ROTHENBERG AND MILOS SOVAK)

[PREAMBLE]
How do they seize me these strange beings with no names
All their history as simple as Gibraltar
Bastards of reality & air who wander over Africa
The angelus clangs out
. . . . . .

On one of those steamy nights the end of June in 1935
I walked past the Luxembourg Garden
It was just striking midnight
And the streets were empty
With the emptiness of moving vans
Deserted like Ash Wednesday
And I thought of nothing
Had no wishes
No I wished for nothing rushed to nowhere
Nothing weighed on me
Like a man sans memory I walked & walked
A man yes like a box
The way old men walk who no longer need to sleep

I still don't know what caught me maybe my own sigh
The trees out in the garden filling with white bandages
I looked back at those paper bindings
Over an iron hedge
Could I have been singing as I walked?
Just singing
& Paris sold off like a slave
Convulsed & crazy
Paris with your bridges made into your chains

Prague, Paris, Leningrad & all the cities
I have ever walked thru
Now I see a herd of women bound with ropes
The glow is drowning them the sky still free
Like bracelets that a crowd is rushing over
Oh you gates you bridges
Of the one & only city that I see
A city cut thru by the Seine & Neva
by the Moldau
And a brook where peasant women wash their clothes
The brook I live by

And windows
Thru the first a statue comes in from the Place du Panthéon
The next looks over the Charles Bridge
Thru the third I'm staring down the Nevsky Prospect
And still more windows

How I loved the grocer's paper cones
With secrets that lie too deep
That they remind me of an empty chamber
With its heaps & heaps of shirts
A shaft that holds the common grave of nameless women
I know a forest with its broadleafed burdock
under which a girl's breast's hidden
And a tin cross too & these white hands
A sofa stuffed with gauze that reeks of antiseptic

Who are you woman like a sewing machine I stare at
Like the Boulevard Montparnasse that self-same evening
When I was sitting down outside the Cafe Dome
And studying the frieze on that one building there
five storeys up
I thought that it was snowing
In my mind I took part in the final new year's eve
of the 19th century before it ended
Under a tree filled up with songs a carriage waited
In vain I tried to find the house the sewing machine inside

its shuttle that held a thread I longed to have
Then walked back to the Luxembourg again

The wonder of those gardeners who care so for their trees
they wrap the fruit in little sacks
Like you who cover up your bare breasts with a shirt
As beautiful as a water pail turned over in a house of
[mourning
As beautiful as a needle in a birch bark with the year and date
[stitched in
As beautiful as a poppy head that's shaken by a bell
As beautiful as a shoe out in a flood floats past a window with
[an oil lamp
As beautiful as a wooden stake on which a butterfly is resting
As beautiful as a baked apple in the snow
As beautiful as a bedboard struck by lightning
As beautiful as a wet rag in a fire
As beautiful as a loaf of bread at midnight on the pavement
As beautiful as a button on a cloister wall
As beautiful as a treasure in a pot of flowers
As beautiful as a psychic's table & the words writ on the gate
As beautiful as a garland in a shooting gallery
As beautiful as a scissors snipping off a candlewick
As beautiful as a tear inside the eye
As beautiful as the hairwheel of a clock inside a mare's ear
As beautiful as a diamond in a condotierre's rifle
As beautiful as teeth marks on an apple
As beautiful as the trees in the Luxembourg Garden
the trees wrapped in white linen
stiff with starch

. . . . . .

TRANSLATORS' NOTE. Nezval was, with Vladimir Holan, one of the two great Czech poets of the modernist mid-century (a career in poetry that went back to the early 1920s and the movement called (by him & others) "poetism," later (by him) retitled "realism."

Contact with André Breton & others of the Surrealist hard core brought him, circa 1933, into the larger European & global art nexus, in the service of which (& more than most) he offered up a mix of modes & genres: open & closed forms of verse, avant-garde theater collaborations, numerous translations of his modern counterparts & predecessors, & still more surreal, chance-oriented prose works & novellas. His commitment to communism came early (1924) & later made him a prominent member of that network of tolerated avant-gardists/poet-heros that included Neruda, Brecht, Picasso, Hikmet, Eluard, & Tzara, among others (with some of whom he shared pro-forma hymns to Stalin in the early Cold War years). "Shirt," which reveals its date of composition in its opening lines, is one of the key poems in Nezval's *Woman in Plural* (published: 1936) (a volume of mixed poetry & prose ("poems, diary & notebook entries, poems for the theater, new 'surrealist experiments'"). It follows the 1934 founding of the Prague Surrealist Group & Nezval's issuance that same year of "A Manifesto for Czech Surrealism" as a poet-generated poem-centered "call to arms."

MICHAEL PALMER

A LANGUAGE OF THE UNSAYABLE: SOME NOTES ON IRVING PETLIN AND THE SEINE SERIES

In a culture so much of the moment, of nowness, one all too susceptible to the luxury of forgetting, Irving Petlin's art offers a temporal window. It is a window that looks out at the immediate world, certainly, but more significantly, it looks beneath surfaces, beyond appearances, toward the undisclosed, the enfolded and the disapppeared. His is a body of work that, for this and other reasons, lies largely outside the accelerated play of the art world, that often frenzied quest for currency. Its present is a complex vision of temporal folds, times inhering within other times, tenses we might name the future-past, the first-and-last, the lost-and-found; that present of what he has called an "impregnated presence," and "something in a sense plucked from the mind and not from nature itself."[1] The art is insistently exploratory, searching for the meeting point of the interior and the exterior, and for a language of the unsayable. It returns again and again to certain resonant objects and figures, recalled or imagined, in order to see them again from a slightly altered perspective and thus discover their undisclosed or alternate meanings. (Hence the crucial importance of the "series" throughout his work.) It is understandable that such a quest might prove baffling to many critics, however skilled in decoding the contemporary swirl of proliferating styles and ideologies, since it asks for another kind of silence and reflection, another way of seeing, with the mind's eye. Though it is by no means literary painting in the accepted (these days usually deprecatory) sense of that term, it nonetheless elicits a kind of reading, a sounding and resounding of its characteristic figures, objects and landscapes. Like Bacon and Kitaj, with whom his work at various times has been compared, Petlin's narrative—or anti-narrative—emerges obliquely, through its multilayered, metamorphic representations. Again like Bacon and Kitaj, though in his own distinctive manner, his work foregrounds a deliberately articulated tension between astonishing draughtsmanship and expressionistic rawness, the latter a legacy of his Chicago School background.

I have followed the evolution of Petlin's art for well over twenty years and have watched its figural imagination grow more and more assured, its signifying capacity deepen, its palette and subject matter expand; so I eagerly accepted the invitation to visit his Paris studio in May of this year, to view the Seine Series and to respond in whatever way I chose. Before arriving, I thought a great deal about the multiple risks of the project that he had undertaken. How once again to depict a site so laden with representations that it has been virtually abandoned to week-end painters of the scenic for more than seven decades? How possibly to engage anew with some of the central signifiers of European cultural life and history?

I spent parts of ten days in Petlin's studio off the Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine (located in the same complex of apartments where James Joyce completed *Ulysses*). Each day we would discuss the individual canvases for a while, and then Irving would leave me alone with them to look and take notes. What I gradually came to realize was that, across this set of oils and pastels, Petlin had attempted to depict a series of silent conversations, conversations between the visible and the disappeared, the living and the dead, multiple pasts and multiple presents, conversations at once synchronous and diachronous. Historical and spatial anomalies are deliberately and systematically invoked to create a fracture in the apparent scene or site, and within this fracture the drama of historical and personal memory is enacted. We witness too a convergence and conversation between the language of oils and the language of pastels, the two media in which Petlin has most often worked. Here they are dramatically juxtaposed, in a sequence of mutual, sympathetic interrogations.

The Seine Series was first suggested to Petlin by the sight of the river in January of 1995, swollen from torrential rains, inundating the quais. To Petlin's eye, it was as if the river, in the force of its flooding, were reasserting its primitive self, its aqueous memory, while simultaneously stimulating a flood of personal recollections and associations. Thus the first canvas, "The Seine (in flood)," sets what is the essential, methodically compressed frame for the entire series (for, though these are indeed panoramas, there is an almost claustral feel to the majority of them). To the viewer's left is the Pont de Tournelle; at the approximate center of the canvas, on the Ile de la Cité, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, in Petlin's words, "the disappearing apex,the emptying center," of the series; and to the far right, Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe. Near the base of Notre Dame, tacit and invisible to the viewer, lies the Holocaust Memorial. Wisps and streaks of atomized, grainily dispersed reds and yellows dot the sky. Spidery aerials and chimney pots establish their listening and watching,

remnantal presence. The river is seen from a high vantage point, as if at once from multiple, subtly shifting, points of view. The "now-and-then" and the "near-and-far" have been set in play. Beginning there, the work resonates through its various echo-chambers. From my Paris notes, I would like simply to offer a few points of orientation.

To the viewer's right in the second canvas, "The Seine (The Arab Rider)," floats a figure in blue, taken from "Le Cavalier Arabe," a drawing in the Louvre by Fromentin. It hovers like an ephemeral witness to this canvas which appears almost to have been flooded and stained by the river. Rather than painting things on the surface of the picture, the brush seems to be in the process of bringing up submerged forms. The foreboding evident in the first canvas has become more manifest. A dematerialized, wound-like Notre Dame is represented in red.

"The Seine...October 17th, 1961" refers to a nightmarish incident witnessed by Petlin in his youth during a protest against the Algerian war. Walking along the Seine, he saw countless bodies floating by, the corpses of executed Algerian activists. The void of the river fills with white stains, white absences or erasures, figures-which-are-not. The Institut, not yet built in 1961, nonetheless stands as a brightly colored, enigmatic signifier of a world as yet unacknowledged, invisible. Light has been wrenched from the sky, which in turn is now flooded with terrestrial hues and textures.

The fourth canvas, "The Disapppeared, I," is the first of two dedicated to the great post-Holocaust poet, Paul Celan, who lived in Paris after the war and committed suicide in 1971 by leaping into the river from the Pont Mirabeau. The painting evokes the Paris of World War II, a shrouded, blacked-out city, its bridges spectral, its sky filled with puffs recalling anti-aircraft fire. One window is illuminated, for Celan, who is not there. A remnant of the recently destroyed city of Grozny appears as an echo within this echo.

"Paris is White" is dedicated to the poet and author of *The Book of Questions*, Edmond Jabès. Forced into exile from Cairo as a result of the Suez episode, Jabès lived in Paris for the rest of his life. The title derives from a key moment in Jabès's *Return to the Book*, when the doomed lovers, Sarah and Yukel, first meet. The whiteness of the page, the city, the canvas, the desert. The white of the third picture in the series has been transmuted into a ground of light. The spiritualized verticality of the painting contrasts with the horizontality of the others in the series. The city's architecture has dematerialized, and everything is in flux. Lines and masses waver, refusing fixity, completion.

As the title indicates, "The Seine in Sleep" is an oneiric canvas, a portrait of the river as dreamed, eyes closed. What is to be seen, after

the visible has been withdrawn, detail has been submerged? What comes forward when "it" disapppears? The pastel functions here as a kind of mute after-image to "Paris is White." Yet the dream is, paradoxically, full of light. The red of the sky in the homage to Jabès has now been pushed to the far right-hand edge of the viewer's gaze. The Institut, virtually transparent, seems almost to be made of light.

There is an armored and riveted character to the colors and masses in "La Guerre des Deux Eglises," a tautness of representation, yet at the same time an apposite, manifestly oriental, delicacy in the way the city itself has been depicted. Two languages of representation, at once at odds and in dialogue. Language to language, *Book* to *Book*. A form can be seen in the water below Notre Dame, emerging from the point behind the Cathedral where the Holocaust Memorial is situated. Except for this form, the river is now empty, blank. The skin of the canvas itself appears raw, but the "war" referred to in the title is silent, submerged, to be known only by inference. It exists wordlessly, as a kind of weather, an atmosphere. In fact, the identity of the "two churches" is left ambiguous. Christian and Jewish; Jewish and Arab; Arab and Christian, etc?

"The Disappeared, II," a pastel on raw linen, is the second of two for Paul Celan. It asks, "What is it when someone disappears or takes his life?" The atmosphere or weather mantles everything here. Color and event have been suppressed (the usual bright character of pastel itself has been suppressed, as an empathic gesture toward what is depicted). Things are seen through a scrim. Forms that in many of the other canvases are solid have become hollowed out. The disappeared, and the suicide, are also the unrealized, the incomplete, the mute. Browns and greys dominate, along with the linen itself.

The vantage point in the final two canvases shifts to the top of the Institut du Monde Arabe, where the view extends beyond Notre Dame and the atmosphere expands. These are eventless canvases, celebrating what enfolds and underlies the act of depiction. After exploring his most paradoxical of subjects, the river that at once recalls and conceals, Petlin now pays homage to air and light as defining that subject. In a sense, the last two pictures explore the canvas, actual and metaphorical, on which the others appear. In so doing, they bow toward the Monet side of the Impressionist spectrum. This is a surprising acknowledgement for Petlin, whose sympathies among French painters have always lain more with Seurat and Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists. The making of the Seine Series might then also be viewed in part as a process of personal, pictorial dialogue and reconciliation with artistic currents he struggled against in his youth.

•

As an afterword, I should note that my first, more truly collaborative and visceral response to the Seine Series took the form of a poem, "The White Notebook," printed separately. In it, among other things, there occurs a kind of dialogue between the language of Paul Celan and that of Edmond Jabès. I am grateful to the translators Pierre Joris (Celan) and Rosmarie Waldrop (Jabès) for the English language versions I employed.

Note

1 "The Rightness To Be Depicted," a conversation between Michael Palmer and Irving Petlin, *Sulfur* 18, Winter 1987.

MICHAEL PALMER

THE WHITE NOTEBOOK

But we have painted over the chalky folds,
the snow- and smoke-folds, so carefully,
so deftly that many (Did you bet

on the margins, the clouds?) that many
will have gone, unnoticed,
under. Water under water,

"earth that moves beneath earth."
We have added
silver to the river, dots of silver,

red, figures-which-are-not. Tell
me what their names might have been,
what were last and first, what spells

the unfamiliar, awkwardly whispered, syllable?
And what of the blue rider, the Arab
horseman, the *cavalier* composed

of two shades of blue, one
from Vermeer's Delft, the other
from that metallic element called

cobalt, *Kobolt*, goblin? What scene
is he watching? Is it expired space
the fixed eye observes? Is it

the river which has no center, the
whiteness of the city when you say

Paris is white? Is it the arches

of the bridges now narrowed to slits?
Is it the liquid
voices themselves

he watches grow silent?
The voice of closed eyes?
Or the two

impossibly young
in the lighted room
who speak only of rain?

Scene which has no center
or whose center is empty,
elsewhere. The way white is said

rejoining an earlier whiteness
between the done and the not-yet
rolling off the tongue

almond, almond-eyed,
eyeless, denialwhite
as the zero code, wordless,

a language of rhythm and breath.
(In erasure the chestnut
flowering toward origin

among the names for white:
blanc de titane, *blanc de zinc*.)
I met her there at the crossroads.

I don't remember who spoke.
Two breaths, two patterns of echo.
We have painted a bridge's eyes

narrowed, its mouth spurting sand,
dots, more dots, bright,
not visible to the eye.

River of dots rising,
stream of sand with no center.
This was both before and after.

Palette knife beside a photograph.
At recess the children's cries
through the studio windows,

station clocktower to the right,
ochre of expanding sound,
tongue to mute tongue, tendrils -

tendons - over rooftops.
Didn't it turn me -
he asks of his eye -

didn't it polish me
like one of its stones,
remingle and remake me

and draw me quickly down
to where each night in sand
the hour sounds?

We met there at the crossroads
near the small arcades.

I can't recall who first spoke,
who said, "the darkness of white."

We shared one shadow.
In the heat she tasted of salt.

RICHARD FOREMAN

THREE POEMS

SUSTAINING gray light
key stretched
under the fog paw
of damp
idea-mixed trot,

up steps of streets
pulling to be touched,

not-enfolded but slid
under the wax-wet finger
of cold minutes,

bone into lock-almond
creased into the head,

map gouged
in rock-space
like a bell-nut.

Hour into the head
cold cold
keeping the light shell
brief,

city-flash
grain of throat communion,
the bark
of idea on idea
steaming, stained,
glowed.

COULD IT BE that I rose into different light?

Could it be that I lost interest in the total revolve of the semi
[that
called itself circle?

Could it be that I toasted the second rate, under the
[impression
that compassionate meant "hero"?

"Don't doubt anything except the strategically isolated,"
cried my guardian angel.
And I was awake to that
just a little too soon.
Confusion was not MY recipe,
but the angel of that persuasion capped a lifetime of energy
with a slow lift-off
into name that tune-less
they all sang,
so singable.

"How be friends," said the smile.
And I covered, of course, my own mouth first.
"Can't you shine tooth light
into a grimace that hurts no one?"
(It gains access through the dreaming or more than
occasional factors.)

Funny—
it was factories that aimed at the mammoth corrective
[operation.
None of it worked out, but it sure made music
and that best noise
was the worst or all possible words.
A worst rehabilitation machine,
that's why I'm MAD ABOUT MUSIC
chimed in a hell-of-a-lotta young things
who took things off in nose country.

I too, sloped
I mean, slopped,
into the desert of life,
which fools
you,
me,
but not everybody
who of course you recognize as one of my more
SUCCESSFUL disguises.

So when you hear on the grapevine—
"Big guy, your prize just got delivered!"
don't even look.
I'm a crook, about my own handiwork.
So, fingers? Ouch!
Risk it, of course.
It's terrible,
but not really music.

Controlled by iron milk,
stream dug,
heart-not:
milk-word tumbling
tongue in tongue
X'd by the subtle X,
no-tunnel
but all-place,
pricked
through the speaking nostril.
Blood,
white in shock
now
stretched.
Rabid, rapid

through a tooth
timed into the bite,
gaped by the seized gold
quote of time.
stress-ache
under the iron cause
that calms:
nerve data
vast enough
to surface:
dead eaten
into the system vector.
Usurped gulp,
glare-pancake itself
sleep-trundled,
hoisted un-there
to-join.

CAMILLE GUTHRIE

CELLS (I–VI)
Poems for Louise Bourgeois

Cell I

SPRUNG

from a lake of allusion

you woke beyond keyholes

Target-hearted

reflecting a silverglare

you peer through passages
consulting (in fine
languages) dictionaries

PRIVATE in-between
in your hourglass house

unpeeled, bedbodied
from your firefever

flung

to terror levels,
gouging out the day
in badgood time

Cell II

Seafoam evaporating
through waterwalls

REMINDS,

a woken orchid
a spilled elegance
female swan

unbottled, In you

the second-mirror
petals your thoughts
promising vanities

vapors

Oh

you're enamored
of spherical
lingerers, all your
tinted archives
your sweet greediness

Maman, at bosom

a clenched elixir

INSOMNIAC

I'm not awake for arch disciplines
cropped by the surgical ocular

I won't, over-
wrought, come
to grips with my foot
at the stretcher-altar

No,
Lunar scission
Here's a sterile eyeball for
your protection

And as for the
posthumous white-
washing– no
immortelles at all
in your cell

Concordance gasps:

y o u t o r t u r e y o u r s e l f

(and halve the homunculus)

No,
memory's faucet
cannot force it

the hot, the cold

Cell IV

PRESSED
at the door of isolate rituals

an Ear
imagines the tenor of the unsaid

Severed

emphatic cadences

pitch promises to curved desires

WITNESS messages

with elephantine effort

Messages or caverns
roll over, caving in to
private static

The spoken sits

at the periphery of a body

and hollows, hollers

Caesura of intermediaries

stirred by a

DIN

*S*he

speaks from the

conciliations of the

sea's roar

What is heard

could dumb–

found a small

bird, or smaller girl

Cell VI

Now the THUMB

of precision

and its glinting tools

grimaces, removes

unsilenced

all the doorknobs

all

you dreamt is

more,
all

you arranged,

ingeminates

CARLA HARRYMAN

SOMATIC MEDIATIONS

The physical, spiritual, and psychological diseases, sufferings, and desires of the body are trapped, exploded, and transformed in Mary Ann Unger's work. In her negotiations between psychological and physical forces that the body both inhabits and makes necessary, Unger refuses dualisms: positive and negative, life and death, empty and full, male and female, technology and nature seem welded to each other. Yet it is not possible to consider Unger's work as separate from our history of anthropomorphic dreams of the earth as a sustaining body, even if it is not "gendered" female, for all of Unger's abstract forms invoke the association between non-sentient elemental life forms and the human form and its necessary relationship to cultural forms.

Unger's sculptures are first the product of an intense imagining of the human body from the inside out, from the visceral fact of itself as it knows itself to be among others like itself—all of which are dependent on the creation of objects, extensions of the body, for protection. In Unger's work shelter and coverings are understood as the basis for culture; thus, the products of nature are always "fabricated." The extensions of the body are both microscopic and huge and are understood to be compatibly bounded to each other as a system: the bundles of our genetic codes might be seen as linked to other bundles we carry with us, both in our minds and in our arms or on our backs. The forms derived from internal (enclosed) and external (exposed) psychophysical environments are basic to the culture we negotiate as collective creatures. Unger's sculptures will not allow consideration of the singular body apart from its interrelationship to other bodies.

Whereas a child in a mother's arms looks lighter than it feels, Unger's sculptures are lighter than they look as if an experience of weight has been displaced onto sight. Her relationship to sight is, therefore, not anxious but part of a necessary distribution of collective responsibility. The heaviness of the body and its suffering is lightened through the redistribution of the burden of the body into a collective and shared world. This shared world is comprised of a promise to

make sense of the relationship of the living body as interior body to "the dark icons" of the visible world we create to protect and defend it. If it is the case that in our protecting of the body, we derealize our own physicality, Unger explores the basic human events that awaken our experience of the body as real. Here there is an attempt to envision a balanced distribution of the body's needs through reference to basic materials such as wrappings, coverings, shrouds, pilings and shelters that, like the individual pieces of her sculptures can be lifted and carried. Unger has metaphorically balanced her physical and psychological relationship to her world in that she can carry her own sculpture without having to diminish its scale.

Just as the repeated experience of supporting and being supported constitutes a collective knowledge of shared physicality, so does the cumulative residue of cultural artifacts protect us from the shared physical knowledge which would be unbearable without mediation. Yet the affects of such mediation must remain basic. The sculpture's references to simple wrappings, pedestrian movement, and the distribution of weight and burden awakens for the viewer what must be Unger's personal and deeply felt critique of the overmade world in which most of us live. Unger's use of materials, the light steel welded armatures covered with hydrocal and textured materials such as cheese cloth and graphite, integrate the metaphoric rebalancings of human power and fragility central to her concerns. The individual forms are unlovely in their singularity and perfect in their integrity as objects and in respect to the total assemblage of each work, which is always comprised of more than one form. The assembled pieces refer to primary human activities: torso-like structures that hold loafy bundles or pod-like poles suggest migration or slow movement and pillars holding the weight of abstract forms invoke depossessed and mourned figures. Here neither life nor death are "touched up" for viewing. Nothing distracts from the primary site and sights of our physical experience of each other.

Thus, Unger's *Pieta/Monument to War* is about weight, support and the memory, not only distant, but proximate of all of the physical weight that people bear: their own and that of others. It is this cumulative memory of weight, of support, that is the subject of her interrogation born of the imagining of the body as viscerally present. If one were to recollect, imagine, reexperience all of the times one had been supported or had supported another physically, history would open differently: we would look upon its events and its symbolic artifacts through the slant of a silent epic and the prehistoric would become more present in it. These sculptures, then, might be thought of as the "living" remains of such an epic in so far as "living" in this

context means unresolved mystery; for we can not know the history that her sculptures invoke, except perhaps through our own experience of our bodies within the collective body and through the representation of strong mental images such as those that Unger's work embodies.

The condition of the person as weight-bearing creature is bonded with the transformative force of the strong mental images. Metamorphic power seems to be born of our proximity to each other and our combined abilities to negotiate life cycles. Through the lens of Unger's works we become the primary objects of our habitats: our limbs are pods and seeds; bundled together we make shelters, hulls, shafts of wheat, loaves, poles, monuments and symbolic artifacts. We carry not only the weight of our bodies but also the culture that is also our survival. One is required to see herself also then as a product of migration.

Unger's series of sculptures *Across the Bering Straight* is a tribute to the bearing of weight over time. The people who crossed this straight in an unimaginably distant time did so at the rate of possibly one mile per year. Of this piece, Unger writes, "the stumpy torso-like forms bear long poles or burdens on their shoulders, always on the move, going forward. They survive. They suggest migrants carrying their tent poles and their bundles of possessions. They might also suggest mothers holding their children or men carrying their dead home from war." Thus her representation of the migration suggests other human events in which the same kind of physicality is demanded of its participants.

In migrations, cultures are carried: these cultures are part of the body: in the condition of migration bodies bear the weight of their shelters and become them. The weight is born over a very long period of time. It is the consideration of the experience of the body in time that joins Unger's envisionment of the body to others' histories.

Mary Ann Unger

SIX SCULPTURES

Pall Bearers
Hydrocal over steel with pigment, wax and graphite, 77" h x 72" x 36", 1989.

Pieta / Monument to War
Mixed media over steel,
85" h x 61" x 72", 1990. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

Deposition
Hydrocal over steel with patina, 1991.

Hanging Bone
Hydrocal over steel,
77" h x 76" x 28", 1988. Photo: David Allison.

Across the Bering Strait #1
72" h x 152" x 43", 1992–93. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

Across the Bering Strait #2
Cement over steel,
72" x 178" x 36", 1992–93. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

YACHATS, THE SHORE

Looking into littoral fog
the shore has always stopped me,
laid a barrier across association,
made writing by the sea
listless, as if stumbling about
an ode. . . dangerous to stare
at nature and write—

*

Surf crests have leatherine
concaves
then it's all froth crawlers trill

Gigantic skirts with meandering hems,
slits in weave to sand

Little cliffs' white rubble,
high sizz then
"sundered parentage"

Ropes vertically aflow—
describe the sewing throwing:
Mumonkan stitch, gateless
barrier

as if a text of iles
detextiled while
ile flexing
wound sound

perception stops,
a shushing weave whelms the eyes:
skyscrapers under nuclear barrage

I'm a little boy in my glandbox
sifting mommy purr,
the simmerunderoar spreads
a virus under tone
taking the lips back to suckle shapes,
trom bone
the slides of brass
under 4:30 sun
silver so glaucous pocked,
more cicada
than constant

Watch out for unity as you age,
it's in cahoots with reduction

Be as these rocks not deluged,
just gleamy in their lenten instant

Myriad-glimmered
reason surfing the tectonics of dream,
the dipping peak of them—
Mallarmé's "throw" still tumbling in the air,

poetry as shipwreck, oceanic page,
"a throw of the dice" the gamble of alchemical
research
"will never abolish chance" no way
to predetermine reception—

unless a work of art is its own shipwreck
a master is proposed outside the maelstrom

Surf looks more perfect than I can imagine a god,
perfection that if not seen through
dwarfs imagination—

seen through, nature *is* imagination,
roving tooth breast
on which I row
60 years a second

Pyramidal speed-ups
slow lozenges of satin steel
storied pounce in rinse,
dipping sun drapes a mail
across the crestlets

then 7 gulls in muscular goodbye.

28 May 1995

HARALD MESCH

THE RICHNESS OF INTERFACE
INTERVIEW WITH GARY SNYDER

Though he was very tightly scheduled in the spring of 1983, Gary Snyder kindly agreed to work with me for two or three hours. The interview took place on April 20, 1983 in the living room of his home in Kitkitdzee in the Sierras.

—Harald Mesch

Mesch: Both your poetry and your prose seem to speak out of a recognition of the interrelatedness of poetic thought and ecological consciousness—and by ecological consciousness I mean the awareness of an ultimate wholeness and interdependence of body, mind, and environment that make up the "oikos," the 'house' in which we live, and it is that wholeness that is accessible to experience but not to discursive thought or language. My question: Could you, in terms of beginnings, try to retrace your own history of the recognition of the mutual groundedness of poetry and ecological consciousness?

Snyder: That's too big a question. To do that properly would require a whole autobiographical-philosophical rap. So how do we get some bones out of that?

Mesch: What about: When and in what terms did you become conscious of the ecological dimensions of poetry?

Snyder: First I have to say how I became aware of the ecological dimensions of the world: That was growing up in the Pacific Northwest north of Seattle, out in the country on a very small farm, surrounded by woods, so that I had a childhood close to nature. I was tuned into it, studied it a lot, spent time in it, became very aware of what was happening week to week through the year. Additionally, I got hold of books that taught me how to identify the birds, the plants and so forth, and I became a junior naturalist in my own area. Finally I met people who knew, older people who could help me learn more about it. So like some Americans I grew up actively learning the natural

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world around me, like many Europeans too. Some people do this and some don't. There probably is, to start with, a fundamental difference between several types of human beings. I don't know how we would account for it. I think it transcends upbringing or cultural background.

Mesch: What is the level on which this difference shows?

Snyder: Well, I'll describe it to you. Richard Nelson's recent book on the Koyukon Indians of Central Alaska. Fascinating book on their view of nature. Describes how all of them are intently aware of the aliveness of everything. As they say, "we are always being watched when we are in the forest." We are always being watched. It's a live thing for them. Also they are always aware that nothing that you do in relationship to the natural universe is without value. Every act you take has meaning, is moral. To kill an animal and then not to skin it and not eat it is immoral and wasteful. The karmic results of that will be negative for you. To waste is immoral. To speak in a harsh or rude tone of a certain animal or bird is not only immoral, but it invites retribution somehow from within the natural system. This transcends any kind of logical or scientific explanation, this way of seeing things, and yet in the largest sense of what cause and effect networks are and in the greatest extension of our notion of interdependence it becomes comprehensible. However, it starts with something that either people feel or don't feel. Some people, even though not brought up in such a culture, where it is part of the whole society's perception of nature, nonetheless feel that way. I am one of them.

Mesch: You would say that. . .

Snyder: I know others that. . .I have met a number of other people who read more philosophical or ecological explanations of nature to know when they go for a walk in the woods that it's alive. They perceive it. It's as if today we have two kinds of human beings in the world. Tame and wild. Or it might be that there are two psychological types: one that harks back to the Stone Age and one which is post-civilized. The post-civilized strain turns only to social affairs and is very sensitive to what happens among human beings and often very insensitive to what happens in nature. This is foolish speculation, but my point is that in my own case, I had an intense sensitivity to nature from an early age. What I read later merely confirmed it.

Mesch: Did you every ask yourself why you were more sensitive or why you have this sensitivity while others don't have it?

Snyder: Maybe it's an extra dimension or development of one of the senses. It's perhaps a kind of sense perception. You were asking about my case. So to follow along: the connection with poetry is fundamentally that if you hear the voice of nature, the way you translate that and communicate it to human beings is one sort of

poetry. I have written about that in my essay called "Poetry and the Primitive." Now you can go into far more sophisticated ways of talking about the relationship between the perception of natural systems and poetry, but if you get down to the basics of any oral literary tradition in a natural culture you'll see that much of the time the poetry is a voice from the nonhuman, the song of animals, the song of plants, the song of the weather. It's as though that is the mode through which nature speaks to human beings. Now that's not the only thing that poetry does, of course, but this is one of the aspects of poetry. The Koyukon Indians up in Alaska are very keen on bird songs and they say "birds are wonderful singers, we get good ideas for our songs from the birds."

Mesch: Whatever "ideas" that means.

Snyder: Well, melody, language also. Because they can hear a bird saying things in their own language.

Mesch: In whose language?

Snyder: Athabaskan. They hear the birdcalls making phrases as we can hear birdcalls making phrases, so they hear them making Athabaskan phrases, and they change it around. Of course poetry is music and rhythm and melody as well as words so they say that birds are good singers. They also assume that the birds are speaking the language: that they are not just singing, that they are talking to each other.

Mesch: Which is actually anthropomorphizing.

Snyder: No, no, they don't see it like that, that's our idea. They are not anthropomorphizing, they are seeing themselves as part of the same thing too. They are not casting a human image on that, if anything, they see themselves in that image. They say, "Well, the birds are talking to each other and we do that, too."

Mesch: Well, to cast another bone: Could you tell in what ways your involvement with Zen Buddhism has influenced your understanding of poetry, has influenced a development of ecological consciousness? Or maybe, in another way, to what degree did your ecological awareness determine your turning to the Far East?

Snyder: I'll start with the first half of it. How did my sense of nature connect with Zen. As I entered adolescence in the Pacific Northwest, I gradually started traveling deeper into the mountains. Farther than just staying on our farm. I began to go into the high mountains when I was 13 and 14, and I started mountaineering when I was 15, and then I did quite a bit of snowpeak and glacier climbing, all over the Northwest between the ages of 15. . .

Mesch: All on your own?

Snyder: Or with friends. Between 15 and 23, so I did a lot of climbing. My thoughts about American society and politics were going all through that time too and I became curious about how

different cultures related to nature. I was studying anthropology, working on American Indian culture, primarily ecology, working with some of the Indian people of Eastern Oregon and Eastern Washington, the Upper Columbia. When I stumbled onto Chinese philosophy, first of all Taoism and then later other varieties of Far Eastern thought, I was taken by the notion that perhaps there was a way that a high, complex, literate sophisticated civilization could at the same time still maintain good relationships with the natural world. Pursuing that investigation brought me very soon to Zen Buddhism as a school of Indian Buddhist thought that had received most from Taoism and became a synthesis of Taoism and Indian Buddhist thought. I also found in Zen something that touched me personally in terms of my own spiritual quest. And so it seemed a very useful thing to do to go into Zen study. The connection of high civilization and nature: Can it be maintained?

Mesch: Yes, but your turning to the Far East presupposes already a consciousness of your relationship to nature. The relation was no more a naive one with you.

Snyder: I understood what the Western cultural connection with nature was, so I was interested to see if China and Japan actually have an alternative way of doing that while still being as they are, very high civilizations. The question is, is civilization itself, per se, intrinsically unable to cope with nature in any intelligent way?

Mesch: How did that question get started?

Snyder: In my case it started with recognizing the contradiction between the apparently benign values of American democracy and its actual effect on nature.

Mesch: Your poetic discourse locks in, in many interesting ways, with the scientific discourse of people like E. Odum, H.T. Odum, Ramon Margalef, J. Lovelock, M. Sahlins and others. My question is: have the writings of these biologists, ecologists, anthropologists first been of importance to you, or is it rather that your poetic development led you to concerns similar to those of these scientists?

Snyder: I was always interested in their concerns from the age of 12 or 13; this is if you are a self-taught naturalist and then you later hang out with friends who are good ornithologists, good botanists, good marine biologists, you soon hear about ecology. I first heard about ecology when I was 16, as a branch of the biological disciplines. I was reading what texts were available back in those days. So, how to flesh out what you perceive intuitively with hard facts. I perceived intuitively the way things connect. I also found it fascinating to flesh it out with the data. That's what these guys like Eugene and Tom Odum help you do. So from the very beginning of my own writings in poetry I was

informed by these sorts of connections. In fact, after ecology and anthropology, the next step is to study Buddhism.

Mesch: One notion that keeps recurring when you speak about poetry—and to me it seems to be relevant in the context of both poetry and ecology—is the idea of "the edge." I quote: "The true poem is walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said, that's the real razor's edge." Another time you speak about poetry as a tool, a sharp edge. Could you comment on the implications of that idea?

Snyder: The first example, the metaphor of poetry as an edge of what can be said and what cannot be said is every old, of course. It's common in the Far East and in India in talking about that line between the unsayable and the sayable. I really cannot add anything more to that except to say that this is a traditional way that poetry has been understood, a kind of razor's edge. Poetry as a tool that has an edge is one of the number of metaphors that I have used, but also traps, a net, as a bait, which are all metaphors for catching, and an edge I suppose is a metaphor for clarifying, not necessarily discriminating. It's maybe not too good a metaphor. Prose is probably more usefully described as having an edge. Prose can show how to make clear discriminations. In poetry you generally don't do that, it's not the task of poetry. So I don't know how far you can go with that.

Mesch: Again, as far as I understand the metaphor of "the edge" it implies, to quote you, "the act and the thought being together," or, similarly, the mutual simultaneity of light and dark.

Snyder: That's nice. That's the act of being totally in the moment, which poetry sometimes accomplishes, the act of presenting much, *much*, all in the moment. Again, I don't know if we need to invoke "edge" for that. But it is a valid function.

Mesch: Well, I was thinking of "the edge" as a liminal space, as an interface, as something in-between.

Snyder: AHHHH, *interface* is better, now, I've got a couple of points that talk about that specifically: *Interface richness*, the meeting area, that's an ecological concept. That can actually be demonstrated.

Mesch: What I was thinking of was "the edge" or interface both as a dividing but at the same time as a meeting line.

Snyder: Well, in that sense poetry is a territory of meaning, sure. It's a boundary territory where things come together, where language meets silence, and you could play it back that way and say that silence meets language where internal images meets articulation.

Mesch: Let's see, what ecological implications does the idea of "edge" in the sense of interface have for you?

Snyder: Well, there are all of the ecological ramifications that go with the concept of biological interfaces where the sea meets the shore, right? Which is full of richness, or where river water meets sea water coming down into a bay or estuary, or where two ecological plant zones lap over each other, that's a good subject, where things come together it's always a richer zone. Also it's always more highly speciated. Again we can draw both data and metaphors from that, in regard to human affairs or any other affairs. Poetry certainly can be seen to be operating in some ways like that. Poetry can also be seen as a special variety of language, we say language is like an ocean, silence is like a continent. Most of the ocean (drawing a fictive line on the low table) is out here, most of the continent is here, but at the shore (pointing to the fictive line) where the ocean laps over the continent is poetry. Very rich, very narrow, very intense. The silence is not silent. What we mean by silence is unarticulated consciousness, silence is what you are doing when you are not doing but thinking, is like having a whole back country of wild animals going on, and when you speak you just say "sparrow" or "hawk" or "oak," but the whole thing is back there, it's all there.

Mesch: You also speak of the poem as a "knot," "a turbulence pattern" of the flow of energy. Does this metaphor have any ecological implications?

Snyder: Yes, that has the energy flow implication. There are three places that I draw that from. One is the Japanese word for "song," "fushi," a knot in the grain, it's as though you're coming along, everything's flowing, then it goes up against a rock and a song arises. Then it goes flowing along. Two, a Sioux Indian statement that there's a basic energy that's going through everything; and it rises like a knot or turbulence or whirl to make that tree that tree, to make a deer, little intensifications of the general flow. Three, Tom Odum, *Energy, Power and Society,* how indeed living systems, like you and me, are intensifications and turbulences of formally structured energy; we're energy traps, anti-entropic. At any point we can be burned, an amount of heat will come out of us. There's more energy here than in the surrounding area, 98.6 Fahrenheit, but the ambient air temperature is about 50. So all of those are literally accurate, the metaphor for poetry then is that there is an ambient energy in ordinary speech, a fairly low steady energy flowing in ordinary speech. When it becomes compressed into a smaller point, we've raised the temperature and given it formal structure, it rises, so to speak, like a tree out of the ground. That's the Japanese image of it.

Mesch: It's a higher order.

Snyder: It's a higher order, higher temperature, anti-entropic.

Mesch: Buckminster Fuller uses in his public speeches the image of a knot. Making a knot in a rope he shows this knot running along the rope: He defines it as a self-interfering pattern, i.e., the knot doesn't get open, it stays that way, running along the rope. The knot for me then is a knot in a weave of the whole. One part of the weave, i.e., a knot, would be you or would be me or anything else.

Snyder: Exactly, that's the metaphor of Indra's net too. Another way that's said traditionally in Hinduism and Buddhism is like the waves on the ocean. The ocean is the unity of everything, but the specifics are like the waves on the surface of it—each wave is unique and specific to its place, and it goes back into the same ocean. That's a very old image. The way is the practice of the ocean.

Mesch: It's just the manifestation of the ocean.

Snyder: It's also the way the ocean is practicing, realizing itself. Studies itself. The ocean studies the ocean and in doing so makes waves.

Mesch: Now I would like to come back to the concept of "the edge": In fact the frontier, as I see it, is an edge too. The frontier, i.e., the geographic experience that pervades American culture.

Snyder: Was a culture, was an edge, right.

Mesch: The disappearance of the geographical frontier is an ecological phenomenon in the sense that its disappearing is simultaneous, almost simultaneous, with the fact that, as you say, the Western civilization has come to "the end of its ecological rope."

Snyder: Well, also its moral and spiritual and its philosophical rope, it's all the same rope, and by Western civilization—I really would have to qualify that by saying that the impulse of the metropole, the impulse of civilized elite Western culture capitals, and the money managers of the capitals has come to the end of its rope. After all, the frontier is just a face of imperialism, that's all. It's not the kind of cutting edge or interface that we talk about when we talk about the richness where the ocean meets the land, it's the kind of edge that's at the edge of a fire, it is destroying as it moves along, it leaves behind it a wasteland. A different edge. We're very grateful that that's over now, that's finished. The tendency towards it that lingers on in people's minds is too bad, the sooner it evaporates the better.

Mesch: This kind of edge, frontier, is an edge that excludes, that makes a difference between what is 'out there' and what is 'in here.' That is: what is 'in here' is superior to what is 'out there.'

Snyder: There is that kind of edge, too.

Mesch: How do you see that?

Snyder: Well, what you're describing is the expansion of monoculture consciousness which either converts or destroys. As it comes

up against something, either it converts it to something it can use, converts it to its own desire and shape, or it destroys it. That's the nature of the expansion of imperialist culture around the world. I don't know what you can do with that. Where do you want to go with that idea?

Mesch: The frontier may be understood as an edge on which a destruction, respectively a conversion, occurs of what is outside the fence posts of Western civilization into a usable inside. But Western civilization, as you put it, has come to "the end of its ecological rope," i.e., it cannot continue in its imperialist tradition. Does this new situation force anthropology to a change of its own quasi-imperialistic attitude? Is what nowadays is being called ethnopoetics the sign of such a change?

Snyder: I'm trying to think what that means. Well, another way of putting it, we're just talking about North America now: Once white people spread all over the Northern hemisphere, all over the Northern half of the Western hemisphere, after a certain point they can't move around any further. They've exhausted the possibilities of moving on and taking a quick high-energy hit from quick resource exploitation. As they stabilize and slow down and begin to quit moving around so much, then the continent across which they had run so hastily and on which they had destroyed so much, of course, begins to come back. The grass grows again, from inside, and what the white people thought they would convert and use, gradually begins to convert and use them. White people begin to quit being white people. I know an elderly Crow Indian teacher in Montana, he says, "I don't worry about what's going to happen in Northern America," he says, "I don't worry about Indian religion because our religion is not something we invented, it comes from the land." Anybody who stays long enough in the place will begin to hear that voice coming up from the land, the land will convert them. Everybody will end up being an Indian. Because that's what North America is. So that might—in the longest range—be what's happening. That's what our interest in ethnopoetics might be, just part of the land coming back.

Mesch: Understanding the frontier no more as a dividing, excluding *edge* but as an *interface* presupposes a questioning of the absolute value of the center, i.e., of anthropocentrism, of ethnocentrism.

Snyder: The center sometimes transforms itself and the edge sometimes becomes the hardest expression of the ego. That's the case with the frontier. What happens on the frontier: You have your hard cases out there, you have men who have left home, who have been chased out of their towns, they're criminals, they're killers, they have syphilis, they don't care who they shoot, they have no families. Those

are the guys who are doing the fur trade, those are the guys who are actually interfacing with the Indians. The people at the center, like historically America, are good deists and Quakers who lament what's going on at the edge. But the dynamics of a capitalist economy are such that you keep sending your hard-bitten men to the edge because there is no place for them at the center. They go out and kill Indians and give them diseases. And the people at the center continue to lament it. That's part of the paradox. The first people in the United States to want to stop the Indian war were people in New York City and Boston and Washington, D.C., they were Quakers. The Quakers wrote some very eloquent accounts of what was going on with the Sioux wars that led up to the death of Custer, and wrote it as well as we could write it in this century about how the Indians should be allowed to have their own land and be allowed to survive. They were part of an elite, but they didn't have enough power to stop what was actually moving out to the edge.

Mesch: The edge in its turn defines itself as being related to the center.

Snyder: Well, some cross over the boundary and become part of the other side. Some come back into the center through their dreams. The center dreams about the white men who join the Indians, it becomes an archetype of fiction. It becomes an archetype of the unconscious. The white woman who was stolen by Indians, who had an Indian lover, who chose not to come back, that's a powerful literary theme and it turns up in Western literature. Joining the primitive, eros, freedom, and it comes back to haunt the elite at the center. I hear that in Germany some people dress up like Indians and have teepees. I was amazed to discover that there are European American Indian clubs. It's some kind of feedback there.

Mesch: In ecological terms I would conceive of America as an interesting study case, because in the United States the consequences of the radical transformation of Western metaphysics into real physics are so obvious and have become so destructive that within this body culturally there progressively emerge elements that start producing antidotes.

Snyder: Yes, indeed I agree completely with that. You said it very well.

Mesch: I would see the Beat movement is producing such antidotes. Would you agree with that?

Snyder: Yes, definitely. Incidentally, about frontiers moving West. People generally tend to overlook one of the world's major frontier movements which was from West to East, counter direction. One of the greatest movements actually was from the West to the East.

Mesch: What was that?

Snyder: Soviet Union, Russia. They expanded all the way Eastward across Siberia with the fur trade, with all the phenomena of the American West except it was the Russian East. All the phenomena: Alcohol, fur trade, guns, syphilis, half-breeds, trading posts, log cabins. All the way to the Pacific Ocean. That's something that people overlook often.

Mesch: Well, to come back to the Beat Movement: Michael McClure speaks of the Beat Movement as "the literary wing of an environmental movement," which, in fact, implies a profound change in the understanding of consciousness. As far as he sees it, consciousness is being understood or is beginning to be understood as a natural or organic phenomenon. You speak of the movement of the '60s as a subculture the roots of which go as far back as 40,000 years. I would call it the tradition of 'the other' in the sense of a counterphilosophy to the philosophical tradition that started in the Western hemisphere with, say, Socrates, Plato. . .

Snyder: OK, that's the same subculture. The counterphilosophic tradition is an expression of the subculture, I would argue. And that the Beat Movement, such as it was, is another expression of that, a small expression. I see a lineage of values that are hanging on for dear life all the way from neolithic throughout Western history. My notion of the counterculture or of the counterphilosophy is neolithic philosophy, the philosophy and the spiritual life and science of the neolithic of 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. It was a period in which a very coherent value system was developed. And it was empiric, dialectical, non-idealistic, psychological, pragmatic, democratic, and ecological.

Mesch: That was to be my next question: Do you see this subculture as an ecological tradition?

Snyder: Yes. Sure. Ecology is just knowing what's going on in nature. Who is it that does not know what's going on in nature? It's people who are not primary producers in the economy, it's people who are higher and higher in the elite classes of bureaucracy, or merchanting or of aristocratic class privilege. In other words, those who constitute the ruling class of the West are un-ecological. They develop their own ways of moving wealth about which is called economics, and ultimately become so attached to moving money in that way, to moving wealth in that way, that they violate the laws of ecology, and cause border people or farming people to overexploit their land, by getting higher taxes than they should go by, cutting more trees than they should. People who live on the land know that that was a bad idea, they are ecological. They say if we cut the rest of the trees out of that watershed we are going to have floods next winter. But the

boss says cut it, and there's nothing we can do. This goes back to Babylon, Sumeria, that's civilization actually. So my thought is that the counterphilosophy is the pre-civilized philosophy.

Mesch: So would you agree with Michael McClure who is saying that the Beat Movement is an expression of an ecological tradition?

Snyder: Sure. Michael and I started saying that to each other 15 years ago.

Mesch: The first time I heard Michael say that, I realized, gee, that's a new way of putting it, and all of a sudden it makes the Beat Movement appear much deeper, not only as a social and literary movement but, as he says, as a change in the nature of consciousness.

Snyder: I think he's quite right. 1955 was when I first heard Michael read a poem about the destruction of whales, that's 10 years before people were talking about whales in any kind of public way. Or I was writing poems about deforestation in 1953 before anybody else was writing poetry about it—people were writing articles on it, for sure. Not everybody that was in that literary scene were recognizing that and realizing it: Robert Duncan certainly was, and in his very metaphysical way he was definitely seeing it; Rexroth, all the way through a very clear spokesman; Brother Antoninus is very clear. I'm talking about the poems written in the '40s and the '50s. Ginsberg is a separate case, he comes out of a very urban background. But it's a very compassionate point of view, he learns quickly. Jack Kerouac is the same. Jack is more urban and East coast mind. Have you seen Bill Everson's book called *Archetype West?* In it he develops the West coast as a whole, the literature of the West coast as a whole going back 60 years, trembling on and stepping into ecological awareness even 50 or 60 years ago. And that this finally really takes form and energy with the Beat Movement, but that it was all laying here already, in the West. And I think he's right.

Mesch: You point to the true ecological function of poetry and art in speaking about "composting" as the recycling of neglected inner potentials. Does the principle of composting therefore open the chance of seeing the cycles of water, air, nutrients as sacramental?

Snyder: Now, how you compost is by meditation. Meditation is composting. I didn't go so far as to say that specifically, but that is literally what meditation is, when you sit still for several hours at a time you are allowing your mind to turn over your consciousness, to ripen, to bring up certain things and turn them back in again, to fold them in again, and to enrich the whole. In doing that you also become intrinsically aware of larger relationships and larger cycles. It enhances your compassion and your understanding of the other and dissolves your sense of yourself as a unique entity, to keep doing that.

Mesch: In what specific terms are thinking of composting? What is being composted?

Snyder: Consciousness. Content of consciousness, being opinions, images, associations, memories, plans, ideas, theories, philosophies, yesterday, tomorrow, my wife, everything. That's all getting composted.

Mesch: Would you see anything like an "edge" occurring there, in the sense of *interface*, in composting?

Snyder: That's a real inner-outer, also now and past. When you compost by meditating you're allowing your habit patterns and thought patterns and images from the past to rise into the present, and dissolving them into the present, really. Old resentments, old hang-ups become dissolved into the awareness of the present.

Mesch: This is an aside: I first came across the notion of composting in a book that is going to be published, a book by Jed Rasula, called *Composting Wreading Poetry*.

Snyder: I don't know that. Sounds interesting.

Mesch: You are the first who speaks about composting. Rasula either independently or dependent on you uses that term. He uses the notion in a different sense: in the sense of poets composting traditional patterns and forms of literature so that they have a chance of being original again.

Snyder: I'd go for that too.

Mesch: What implications has the function of composting to a possibly new understanding of language and the word?

Snyder: That's an interesting question. I'm not sure yet. It certainly is true that linguistic theory so far has not yet really meditated. Linguistic theory is based on pretty surface instantaneous rationalistic understanding of how language works. It's undoubtedly going to have an interesting effect on language theory when more people meditate. When more people are interested in language meditation. The one person who is really an accomplished Zen teacher, who thought a lot about language so far in history was Dogen, the 13th century Japanese Zen master. He was very interested in communication, symbol, and language. There's a Korean scholar up at the University of Oregon who's working on that aspect of Dogen right now, so something may come out of that. The Zen theory of symbols is interesting anyway, theory of symbolism, theory of language. Such as it exists, it's never been much articulated. Something new will happen with language, with our understanding of language.

Mesch: In the context of your own poetry?

Snyder: I haven't articulated any theory on this.

Mesch: This, in fact, connects for me with Olson saying that "logos and the reason pertaining to it" should be realized as being only a stage and not what they are taken to be, usually, "final discipline." That, it seems, connects with what you are referring to when you talk about composting. That, for me, is the edge as interface: the dissolving of concepts, ideas. The word itself being the *interface* where something becomes conceptually conscious while you have to allow the energy that is frozen into this concept to return to the flow, and that happens in the word as interface.

Snyder: Sounds good. Some of my linguistic friends say, though, you cannot define what a word is. But that's just, you know, a technical caution.

Mesch: You can define it in several ways and one is semantic—the content of the word.

Snyder: That's why you can't define words. You can't define what a word is because you can't even define what the content of a word is.

Mesch: But semantics is doing that.

Snyder: That's why semantics is no good, because it can't do it, everybody is giving up on semantics as such because it can't accomplish it. Because language is too much of a fabric, you can't pluck a word out of an utterance. What is part of the word is its grammatical infix, or its superposition, or the tone of voice, or the emphasis that it's given, so there's no such thing as a word. This is a technical linguist's hang-up.

Mesch: Speaking of a possibly new understanding of language, do you see that happening, in what relation would you see that to your own poetry and in poetry in general?

Snyder: Well, I'd have come back to Buddhism and to meditation. I see many new understandings coming to Westerners through Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and the actual practice of meditation. Via those practices we are on the threshold of a far richer set of philosophical and intellectual comprehensions than we've had. We're about to break out of certain limitations that our culture has left us with.

One of the areas in which we're going to break through will be in the area of understanding language. It has implications for poetics, but poetry doesn't need a language theory to be good, that's always after the fact anyway. So that particular aspect of it doesn't excite me. Nor does any of it excite me, really. Because what we're talking about really is improving the menu. When we talk about language theory or understanding language better we're just talking about having a better

menu. But the menu is not the meal. No matter how beautiful you make the menu, only eating the meal will satisfy your hunger. So, the meal is authentic personal experience of a non-linguistic order, direct insight into the nature of yourself and the universe without language being of any particular importance in that. Philosophies are menus, experience is the meal.

Mesch: But philosophy is able in many ways to influence not only the experience that people will have but the other sciences. So philosophy certainly is only the tip of the iceberg. . .

Snyder: I think of philosophy more as flowers that you put on the altar after you've seen it, it's an offering. It's an expression of gratitude.

Mesch: What about poetry then?

Snyder: Same. It's an expression of gratitude.

Mesch: Do you see any difference between poetry and philosophy in that sense, and then language?

Snyder: Not really. I don't see the difference between poetry, philosophy, automotive repair, dishwashing, and cooking. They're all offerings of gratitude, and each of them is demanding, and each of them is beautiful. Our culture tends to value some higher than others. But any of them can be perfect.

Mesch: A number of your poems, especially in *Turtle Island*—e.g., "The Great Mother," "Pine Tree Tops," "The Real Work," "The Hudsonion Curlew," "The Bath"—in structure and language-strategy resemble the form of either a koan or a mantra. Were you aware of such a resemblance while writing them? Did you intend such a resemblance? Which of the forms mentioned do you see them coming closer to?

Snyder: A koan is "a matter to be made clear"—with a point to it, a personal discovery when cracked. Perhaps some of my poems might function this way, for some they do. Some have real points hid in them. But never as mystification or deliberate obscurity. The poems you mentioned are good choices. Some of my poems are "mantric"—"Regarding Wave," "The Bath" among them. I am of course aware of koan and mantra possibilities—though I don't plot it as a deliberate strategy—that would be too intellectual and death to the life of the poem. Perhaps some of the little poems in "Songs for Gaia" *(Axe Handles)* are most like koans.

Mesch: Traditionally metaphor is considered to be based on comparison (simile). In your poetry there is little basis for such metaphors. Do you consider your poetic language to be metaphoric in its essence?

Snyder: True, I don't use small metaphors much within poems. Whole poems are often metaphors though, or a group of poems are governed by one metaphor.

Mesch: In your talk "Poetry, Community, and Climax" you speak about a decentralization that includes the "'decentralization' of poetry." Where do you see such decentralization taking place?

Snyder: Decentralization of poetry: away from High Culture and University standards toward vernacular song/story/poetry values; away from Standard Language and more toward local speech; away from publishing centered in New York and toward small regional presses; and toward an acceptance of bilingualism as a normal, healthy state of affairs. All of the above is controversial and it's not an absolute program but a *tendency* I'd like to see encouraged, especially in the USA.

Mesch: Today we are desperately in need of an environmental ethic. What is the potential of poetry regarding the development of such ethic?

Snyder: Poetry and all the arts contribute to our "getting out of our skins" into a direct apprehension of the world. In its deepest application art can perhaps lead us toward the realization of our oneness with all life in an intimate, personal way.

Mesch: Our contemporary situation could be understood as being an ecological crisis that is intimately connected to the concept of nature as it was, in fact, developed by the Romantics. I see your poetry as being not an analytic but a poetic and creative critique of the idea, of the Romantic idea of nature.

Snyder: I like that. I like what you just said. I would like to think that my poetry stands in that relationship to the Romantic tradition.

Mesch: Could you point out some difference between your own attitude to nature and the Romantic attitude to nature?

Snyder: The best way I can express it is in a very pregnant thing that Dogen, the 13th-century Japanese philosopher and Zen master said—incidentally, a man who is very very important; if you're not acquainted with Dogen I'll tune you into him. His work is circulating around now in ecological philosophy circles on the West coast and some in Europe as the most exciting and powerful thing that people have hit on in a long time, just in the last 3 or 4 years, because his work hasn't been available in any English translation until 4 years ago.

Dogen says: When "the ten thousand things"—it's an Oriental way of saying "everything" or "the phenomenal universe"—advance and confirm you, that is enlightenment. When *you* advance and confirm

"the ten thousand things," that is delusion. Romanticism is the latter. It is the human ego advancing and confirming nature and telling nature what it is. And seeing themselves in nature, to let nature tell you who *you* are is enlightenment. And I think that's the difference between my poetry and Romantic poetry. Exactly what Dogen's point is.

Mesch: What do you think about the Romantic concept of nature and its influence and consequence on today's ecological crisis? What do you think about the Romantic notion of the infinity of nature?

Snyder: What is that?

Mesch: Well, nature being infinite, and you can do whatever you do, it won't influence and change nature in it's infinity.

Snyder: I think that's a bad rap on Romanticism. That's a bad rap. Infinity of resource availability is an imperialist mercantile theory. To give Romanticism all due credit where credit is due: If you want to trace back the intellectual lineage of the conservation movement in the United States it goes back to Romanticism.

Romanticism was wrong-headed, but it nonetheless was the first intellectual movement in European thought to give authenticity to nature and to begin to look at nature and the primitive in anything other than an arrogant light. It has to be given credit for that. It was speaking out of Occidental ego, but to some extent it transcended it too, I think. The notion that we have an infinity of resources—you can't lay that to the Romantics, the mercantilists thought that and acted on those terms.

Mesch: Well, I would say it is a Romantic cliché in the sense of degrading what Romanticism really was.

Snyder: But Romanticism like the Beat Generation got degraded by the press and by misuse.

Mesch: It seems to me that an opposition we inherited from Romanticism is the opposition of nature on the one hand and civilization and technology on the other, between city and country.

Snyder: I think that still is a very useful distinction, we haven't resolved that question yet. Until we understand what the primitive is and what the country is, we have to keep them apart. Until full respect is paid to the primitive or to "the countryside," that distinction has to be held, and I talk all the time to groups of people about the primitive. I always preface it this way: Look, we all know what civilization is, and how great it is, and how much it's done for us, how rich it is, how complicated it is, how fantastic it is, admitting that, now, let us look at what we don't know so much about, namely the primitive, and see if we can give a little time to thinking about what the other side is. People know nothing about it. People know nothing about prehistory, all they have is presuppositions. They've been taught falsehoods

through their whole education. Until we break through that we have to keep the exercise going. I run into the quotation from Hobbes all the time—the life of primitive man, or of archaic man is "brutish, nasty, and short."

Mesch: It expresses some of the essence of his philosophy.

Snyder: This is what is still considered to be the truth, across the world of businessmen, middle managers, bureaucrats. That has to be broken through. The actual fact of it has to be taught instead. So that's a big work, that's one of my big jobs—it's the critique of civilization. In fact, we are organizing a conference on that theme right now. We're going to try to get Ivan Illich, and Stanley Diamond, and Lewis Hyde, May Swenson, myself, E.P. Odum, a whole bunch of people, to have a conference on the critique of civilization. Try to get that clear once and for all. Then we can go on and we can resolve what the dialectic of thesis and antithesis is at this point.

We can't have the synthesis until we make it really clear what those two things are, we have to hold them apart until it's clarified. Then people can go on. As Stanley Diamond says—he's a very interesting Marxist anthropologist, teaches at the New School in New York, he's the editor of the journal called *Dialectical Anthropology* which is published in The Hague, and he's one of the sharpest people in this work which I call the critique of civilization. Like he says, we can't leave the primitive or the archaic behind until we understand it and have incorporated it, then we can go on. This is our work right now to understand and incorporate that. We think we know it, but we don't know it, so we must incorporate that.

Mesch: In what ways do you see the incorporation?

Snyder: Composting. We have to understand it and take it in and absorb it and act on it and be able to act on it. On our understanding for example, you can't go on until you understand that, as wonderful as technology is, you don't really need it. Or, to understand that, as great as modern medical hospitals and doctors are, you can get along without them. Or, as nice as it is to have government, government is not essential. You have to be able to get through all that, then you can go on. Or, as wonderful as it is to have libraries and books—without them we're OK. In other words, that the deepest human potential can be realized without anything of the structures or technologies of civilization. Can be realized actually: It might take a little longer, might take 25 or 30,000 years instead of 5,000 years, but like information, like the richness of information that we have in modern life, it's always there, too. You don't lose it.

So those understandings would allow us then to go on once those understandings have been accomplished. That's an important point.

That's also part of the ethnopoetics' work: Is to define the authenticity of the primitive.

Mesch: I'm a bit worried about the word 'understanding' which I associate with purely rational categories, concepts. I would feel like you can't 'understand' the primitive in that way.

Snyder: I was using it loosely. To incorporate it. It is to the credit of Rousseau that he was able to say to Western culture that we can learn something from the primitive. You know the Chinese and Japanese haven't admitted that yet. They are so hung up on civilization stuff that they could not say that. They really feel that they are superior. So, in that sense Western culture began to loosen up, open up earlier, and then democracy is really just a function of that: the rise of democracy is the rise of the an understanding of the ecology of the primitive, bit by bit.

Partly a function of a new continent, the Western hemisphere, America, which was a mind-blower. Europeans had no idea they were going to enter a totally open frame again. They had been living in a closed frame for centuries. You had to get a permit to cut firewood. I don't have to get a permit to cut firewood. They had to get a permit to cut firewood from the 13th century on in France. The last time you saw deer walking through you yard in Europe was how many centuries ago? We're still living where they're walking through our yard.

So that's the difference still between the Western hemisphere and the old world, and that's a huge instruction to the mind of the old world which is still being absorbed. And it's a huge instruction to Asia, too, which they haven't even begun to absorb yet.

Mesch: You sound very optimistic, you seem to be sure that the technological way of producing goods, produce is going to die out and that the fossil-fuel culture is going to die out.

Snyder: If it doesn't blow us all up first.

Mesch: Yet, what would you see yourself as a poet doing in the crisis that we are living through? In fact, how would you see yourself contributing to finding a way of living ecologically?

Snyder: Some of us have tried to simply demonstrate alternative possibilities here and now, to help allay anxiety, to open up other paths and that's practically speaking like the way I live. It's also helpful to come up with other ideas and other visions. I think you can see how many different levels there are involved in someone like myself and McClure, by thought and deed, both. Trying to share what we've found that works, what we think might help other people, find what works for them. The biggest problem is anxiety and clinging to the old way.

Mesch: Could you be more specific?

Snyder: People don't want to change where they live, they're afraid of losing what they have. Multiple threats from Russians, or from the Depression or the Recession or high fossil-fuel prices. The realest threat that people really face is the threat of increasingly totalitarian governments. Increasingly totalitarian governments will get their way by feeding on people's anxiety and frustration. To welcome high gasoline prices—rather than fear them—as an opportunity to travel less and spend more time with your friends, to live in a closer community, and to make your own local culture is a positive way of going.

Mesch: Well, it seems to me to be the only way.

Snyder: Of course, but people fear it, you see. So you have to demonstrate the positive side of what can easily be taken as a negative direction: gasoline will be $5.00 a gallon—yuck, what will I do then? Live closer to work, ride a bicycle, spend more time around your friends, have a little local theater, give poetry readings, practice calligraphy, grow a garden. GREAT! People have to be taught that. I'm talking about the masses, I'm not talking about University students. Yes, I'm talking about university students too, they are as bad as everybody else.

Mesch: My last question is. . .

Snyder: You have questions which I could talk for 10 hours on each one, of course (laughing).

Mesch: In what way would you see your activity and McClure's activity as changing the ecology of symbols?

Snyder: I'd have to think about how I view the ecology of symbols before I could answer that. I haven't digested that term yet. I can't answer that.

JOHN OLSON

TWO POEMS

Form is an extension of reindeer
It is an eggplant. It is
wide or narrow, a crescendi
of hay & corn & cows. Rapture
is an egg of light gliding over the tongue
in elms of ohms of omen & awe. A form like Marylin

Monroe's skirt in *Seven Year Itch,* blending
delicacy with stone, abandon
with bone. A pleasure
flagrant as rain, obdurate as a bud. We know ourselves
are unknowable
& private as the blood

of a gnu. I broke a tooth
on a piece of popcorn
watching *Startrek*

& that luminous cloud

of nirvana Whoopi Goldberg intimated
turned out to be some inane Victorian Christmas scene
& not the rush

of paradise crashing through the nerves
I thought of the moment
ammonia & hydrogen chloride come together
filling the whole vessel. The soulfulness of stars
in infinite space is a poignant actuality

of light shining over the heads of the audience
but there are much more

fugitive elements at play
in the life around us & a passion

consequently to hurry. To wiggle
& writhe a Venice of the breath. Slide
ciliates into conjugation, dangle syllables

proportionable as bells. Smear the mind on a glass
of sibilants, the milk
of consciousness on the bones of the everyday

GLOSSOLALIA

Gloss begins with glass. But how does one glue
a glint to a glare, a glimpse to a glint, bubble epopee

in a Salzburg salon, mount a weather
like requiem

across a Ugandan gorge. Sift the rhythm

on the back of a leg. Elicit the steam
of a phonemic magma. It is a consummate
charm to chisel a tongue
out of the stalactite

of a string

of coincidences. The colors
are pulled through our eyes
then struggle out of our mouths

as vertebrae. We call them

cocobolo. Kwacha. Hebdomadal
harmonicas. Lumps

of pontification. Temperature
is slippery

constellations
of glossy calculation. Elvis Presley in white
bellbottoms & jacket studded with jewels

on a thermometer in Chehalis
Some Like It Cool. Sometimes what I want to do

is let the meaning out
of an inner
tube, a thin

insistent hiss. Water is a large emotion. Memory an amenity

& mission. I like ladders
redolent with rungs. A sentence is a sensation

like rain. A palaver of stones
in a parabolic brook. A brick
combined with another brick, combined
with yet another brick, builds

a brick balalaika
in a cellar of mood. If you want to say something

towering & disporportionate you must speak
with a fulcrum of lungs
in a tempest of tongues

ANDREW SCHELLING

from THE ROAD TO OCOSINGO

San Cristobal de Las Casas

August 4

Entered the city named for 16th century priest Bartolomé de Las Casas. Bartolomé spent forty years trying to impede conquistador atrocities all through the region, then returned to Seville & a published book, 1552, alerting Spanish authorities to gruesome unchristian acts. "I would write a very big book, but this will have to wait till another time. God willing." Hence *Brevissima Relacion*, the quick account, into print without clearance from Inquisition authorities—

We twist through wet cobbled streets, get lodging where the old town gives out. Na-Bolom (old Maya: jaguar) is a former convent. Cool arcades with deep rooms set around a courtyard. Hans & Trudi Blum, German archaeologists, bought the building decades ago. Now it's an institute for culture research & ecology. Various Maya and student gringo activists run it. Library, dining hall, artifact rooms, office, & planning center. Wild potted plants in the corridors. Old photos and up-to-date maps of Lacondon rainforest cover the walls. Out back under dripping pines they rent a few cabins.

*

Anne & I set up candles. This is the rainy season, cool at night, lanterns along narrow muddy paths. Our clay hut oozes into the soil. I dismantle wood slat bed to get the enormous spider, violet-brown leg hairs, who ran off one pillow when we opened the door. Set her free among nameless leaves where an orchid pot crumbles to mud. And imagine back of feathery pine bough's mist & drizzle, home's familiar moon. Light the fire, get into bed.

That night in my notebook–

Arms scarves
candle shadow ebbing it flickers
over your breasts

here's tequila from a cold bottle
I could live
many lifetimes under a damp quilt
listen to armored trucks rattle the streets
stoke a fire with you

dark nipples
I want them for aeons
pitch-pine twigs crackle
the roof lets in rain

*

5 *August* 8 p.m.

Anne & I take the road to Tenejapa around sunset. Dramatic little forested mountains tightly interlocked. At a rise–wind forcing a black mist across the weathered, brush-covered summit–near a small settlement–three high slender crosses black against darkening sky. The Maya lift crosses wherever a gate or aperture leads down to the underworld–sacred sites–a cave, a spring, certain hilltops with unique vegetation. Soil turns with some curious mineral complex. The crosses were here when Christians arrived in clanking armor. Peter Warshall's remark, that geologists and Indians agree on the power spots–

a wrinkle in earth's old layer
subterranean twist to the limestone
    if you've got eyes you can see it
here by the road

Sixty years ago Graham Greene passed over this ridge on muleback—
anarchist Catholic he noted—

> "The ground sloped up again to where a grove
> of tall black crosses stood at all angles
> like windblown trees against the blackened sky"

> "The great crosses leaned there in their black
> and windy solitude, safe from the pistoleros
> and the politicians..."

Among the crosses long upright pineboughs, feathery & skeletal with a violet cast of sky behind them. Asymmetrical & impenetrable. A dog barks from a hut. Everyone's a pistolero.

*

Aug. 5 *midnight*

And the Spaniards were allowed to choose, among one hundred and fifty
Indian maidens the ones they liked best, paying for each an arroba of wine
or oil or vinegar or pigs. . .

Such was "The Devastation of the Indies," *Brevissima relacion,* Bishop Bartolomé prompting other thoughts—

Old karma the night
is terrible
where once were children fed to Spanish dogs
out there party bosses oil american helicoptors now
what use our poetry
dark forest wind has devoured it
rain & dark wind

*

6 Aug. *Evening*

Our Mexico City friends said we must search out Ambar Past, American expatriot poet who lives in a forest hut outside San Cristobal with her daughter. We track them down at Taller Lenateros, print & papermaking collective at Paniagua 54, where Ambar works and sleeps nights she's in town. Massive colonial door with rust iron rivets swings open, she's come to the door. David Huerta has sent word on ahead, and Ambar's been waiting—

So chatter poetry & politics, catch up with news & drink coffee. There's a kitchen at one end of the big printshop room. Ambar recounts unpublicized local events. Her first winter here a blight came, and no doctors—

"Every child in the village of Magdalenas died. Every child."

We tour the collective's dilapidated adobe rooms to see silkscreen tubs and big platen presses, shelves full of paper, cards, posters, menus. In the back courtyard where the collective grows its food a group of women make paper—

flowers
vines

liquen

figbark

bamboo
old paper

rags
discarded

pine needles
orange peel

other trash

—all goes into the mash.
Refuse turned into splendor. Civilization.
It's late in the day so the ladies who blend up paper go home.

*

7 August

Little Guadalupe image east on the hill. She stands on a black crescent moon & appears, apparition, to kneeling Juan Diego who met her outside Mexico City, 9 December 1531. Tiny white church full of slant sunlight. What old adoration tells me get down on your knees? Incense & liturgy, the human heart momentarily soothed in its torment. Near the altar a few curanderos. Time to retrace our steps down whitewashed stone stairs into town.

Wood smoke hangs in the breezeless air. We eat posolé with rough pork in a small shop, back it with tequila and beer. A cold hard mist sits on the distant grey pine hills. Winding along through middle-class streets admiring the old painted Colonial doors we're teased by two girls about eight or nine selling Chamula dolls. Tiny traditional things the length of a finger, in rough black raiment but ski masks conceal terracotta faces, big spooky eyes gazing through.

"Si, Subcommandanté Maria. Y Marcos! Three pesos."

Up north no one told us
    of lady subcommandantés
the girls giggle

crude wooden
guns in the doll fists

*

8 August *Na-Bolom Institute Library*

Flames crackle in the convent's old fireplace.
Anthropology books on the walls.
Scholarly titles flicker, a lamp is lit, rain drums on the
cobbles, potted trees past the window drapes.
We give a reading of poems & stories to a small cluster of attentive travelers.
Afterwards someone brings spirits in a big kerosene tin.
It's been stewed with pineapple and
curious rainforest spices. Quickly drunk, I sit and read
Bartolomé de Las Casas, his brief appointment 1544
Bishop of Chiapas—

"All Spaniards seeking
absolution must
free their Indians
and make restitution"

til he was yanked back to Spain.

*

Evergreen Cloud Forest *San Cristobal*

Volcanic peak & vague boulders heave free from the tangle
green tangle clings to the rock
archaic water
drizzles from cloud to big leaf
leaf to underfoot mud

How many billions of years
    cool rain on the planet
this improbable cinder
steaming & whirling on galaxy's arm?
Nameless mosses sweep down from branches in sheafs
mist and cloud
    twist in emerald evergreen crowns
Pale yellow orchids hidden by vines
Could be the elfin woodland
Beard first wrote up (1944)
    buttressed trees
    broad leathery evergreen leaves
the air almost too
green to draw breath

*

This heart goes
higher–
    imagine keeping
counsel with clouds
windswept peaks and high ridges
    Sierra Madre
oh jagged Mother

tangled underfoot offspring
so dense
you need a machete to walk
We gaze down into treetops

A woodcutter machete clacks in the forest
smoke lifts
they're clearing for coffee
clearing for cattle
Orange flames spit from the underbrush
    blue haze hangs in ravines

a bit of white lichen a few tough mosses

after 10,000 years the forests to vanish
earth a bare cinder again

What do we call it?

cloud evergreen scrub

*

10 August Palenqué

Jonathan & Rikki join us along the rear arcade of the Palace. High-up seats, us leaning back against pillars, to study thick unfamiliar foliage—lianas, lush green trees & vines, metalic whining of insects. The heat has me down. I listen from enormous distances as the others speak of cigar-smoking priest on the frieze at Temple of the Foliated Cross. Jonathan has his own cigar sympathetically lit—passes it to Rikki & photographs her smoking it savagely among ruins. Her hair runs in rivulets down the stone arcade. I scramble off my perch—down from the arcade, across the cropped lawn. Broken steps drop to the fast silver thread river—Rio Otolum. Bromeliads watch. Head thrust into clear, forceful, shockingly cold water.

Why did I expect tepid water—out of the steaming jungle? On the bottom mottled rocks & clear sand. Plunged my head in again and the water's force nearly threw me. Return to companions up on their smoking perch at the back of Prince Pacal's harem. A bandana to dry my hair and dislodge little pebbles where they've stuck in the whorl of one ear. At my departure a spider monkey shrieks—

Temple of Inscriptions
nine lords of the underworld—Xibalba—

and when they opened the sealed stone passage
down to Pacal's tomb

several skeletons crouched at the portals
set to serve
Pacal in death

clay pots, jewelry
and supplies for the journey
to Xibalba

Pacal's jade mosaic death mask was removed to Mexico City where archaeologists recreated his tomb at the Museo Nacional de Antropologia. 1985 thieves got in & made off
with the mask.

Drenched from humidity tourists labor their way in cloud-like formations up the Temple steps. A massive German man slung with cameras sweating profusely. "Aaach!" Grey rock & emerald color'd grass.

Spinescent palms, cycads, low-branched shrubs, lianas
scarlet blossoms
spider monkeys draped in the high blue canopy
the air a singing insect

and my love crouches beneath
a clamshell green leaf
to be photograph'd

*

Leafcutter

Palenqué

Leaning against a tree in the shade
cool leathery leaves
give relief from hot fuzzy jungle sun
A modern tourist building squats over there
    coke machine, postcards and chess boards—
What's this line of green lozenges
parades down the bark
past my face?

Leafcutter ants
    (genus *Atta*)
a cordon of millions
all of 'em women
cutting half-inch square leaf chips over my head
hold them upright like sails
hurry home to a fungus garden
    sunk in a nest underground

Daughter workers
slick trail leak'd from the tip of the abdomen
tells the route home
Tropical farm girls, government girls,
architect girls—
an empire of girls!
cutting up leaf
    since the Eocene

they harvest as much in a
day as a cow.

*

11 August 1995
Ocosingo

Small church at the downhill & east end of the square, tucked almost insignificant—back among other blank white buildings. Billboard up

above extolls benefits of breastfeeding in colors of the Mexican flag. We enter through arched undecorated wooden doors with black rivets—inside tiled checkerboard floor—& bare smokecolor'd wooden pews, nobody in them. Several Indian women squat in the nave, little children scampering through pine needles that cover the floor in blue-green tufts. Sackloads of pine needles lie among the pews, whorled and heaped up in corners uneven.

Quick little bow
    to black virgin
deep in her recess
    the right hand wall—
who is she
lunar robe cobalt
    & silver

Madre, Madre—

toss a nod across to chocolate color'd
padre with tight-curled hair
    who is he
beatific nook
    other side of the church
a few chipped spots on his
    plaster face

18 months ago gunships raked roof & walls of the church. Ocosingo took the worst of the January fighting. Patients yanked from hospital beds & shot in the halls. A local story. Today no discernible damage to ceiling or floors. The children toss pine needles. Like elsewhere in town fresh paint tells the story—Father Trejo's church—

"Pincha Cura—!"
—General David Rivera as he called in the HUEYs—
"Fucking Priest! He's got nine rebels hiding in there!"

Back outside to bright sun, and stand blinking over the morning market—"dark narrow warren of booths"—a few stalls just raising their awnings. Mostly plastic toys, a few clay pots—and candied pastries heap'd up, colors more bright than the toys. Stack of marine blue cakes catch my eye. Coming & going among the stalls energetic bees—
    which bringeth to mind the "flower world"
Aztec poems of antiquity—

I count out a few coins, the 1000 old-peso is heavy bronze—fits the hand nicely. Poet Sor Juana looks mildly down on the heads side, maybe ruminating a poem. Her baroque philosophic ballad "First Dream" in my thoughts I go over and purchase two Zapatista bandanas from thickset lady chattering Tzeltal to her neighbor. Burnt orange paisley kerchiefs flutter outside her stall like EZLN banners—

six pesos each.

Last night dinner when we got in late, the long drive up from Palenqué, twisty road & little dark fires of huts on jungle precipices. Once into town we overlooked the sloping zocolo from Hotel Central's porch. They'd cut the lights inside and we thought the restaurant closed—just a card game going on next to the window. But a boy brought tequila & we waited for dinner—thin soup and tortillas—looking toward the fountain where soldiers laid six boys on the pavement a year ago January—each shot once through the head. The ranking officer sweating as he led journalists over for photographs.

Freshly painted Government Palace dominates the uphill western side of the square—blue & white under klieg lights—a Disneyland quality, gay and colonial the decorative facade. Caciqués, local bosses, pick their teeth & stand around with guns by the doorway. The bullet holes patched. One more tequila & back through streets dusted by rain, smelling of oil, one or two quiet bulbs glint off the asphalt—to the little posada—only place in town with a room—four of us in three narrow beds—nearly insoluble puzzle to which there's one answer—love—

WILL ALEXANDER

WITHIN THE OPAQUE TERMITES' MORASS

They
of collided pincer malfunction
of egregious clashings of dread
of the privity of corroded malarial witness
embedded in a boiling worm foundation

this life
conducted in a smoky aurific substratum
fed by miraculous enmity
by seismic fault
by riddled tarantula mound
by blank tornado morass

each haunted aspiration
within imploded flanks of soil
within its rotted neon stochastic

& these implosions burn
& scatter their inversions
as if wheat were being pictured
in the illusive flash
of primordial fungus
crystallized
by acidic fallopian fate
by a forge of molecules
scattered as oblivious distraction

this life which functions
as a limitless biochemical mortality
as an alchemic ridge or an asteroidal morgue

they
who eat flames from exploded rain sieves
who take as status
vicious armaments of wood
under blank absorption suns
moving
like a voracious flood of pale neutrino trout
stunning
invulnerable
like a scurrilous cortical mimetic
beneath a flask of exploded grain in a well

or a cloudy reptilian salt
where generic abasement burns
& ghostly electrodes extend
into treeless electrical shocks & gullies

& from this intensity
a leap of telepathic kindling
from the poles of Alpha Centauri
from a preexistent wormwood
from a riveted fire on Callisto

therefore
from old oppositional lightnings
from it's fleece of flaming thistles
there comes to exist
an alien Iridium lantern
with its instantaneous beam
which penetrates the thorax
which coils and recoils the termites' impact antennae
as they ceaselessly inflame
the wrenching leonine soils

KEN CORMIER

TWO POEMS

WRECKING VISION

A rough trudge toward explosions of sound, signals which slash, practically morphemes, luring close, nearly phonemes, zipping and selectively stirring up meaning, unselecting special blank faces hunched under coat lapels, thickly gloved hands jammed pocketwise, ignoring the flourish, videodeaf to that which, to me, seems a sonic wrecking ball.

Close enough now to see a metal neck scraping, pivoting and bracing its core, scraping its iron straight teeth, crashing its brainless down in sweeps of brick and wirepipe, chunk dust in plumes of gravity shake, fenced in by tight looped aluminum and beerbreak flesh-pods with helmets, tattoos, and arm hair.

Two transfixed faces traced in silhouette behind sunlit glass, and I, with a crack-lipped smile, not now alone, or ever, among the soft drone stepping, vision focused into chain-link tunnelling, remembering the monster, clawing down brain gaps and fingering slowly the eggshell tissue flakes, hard hat area, teeth clenched and chattering with cold.

Sun lamp down, faces withdrawn, machines stalled and
[sleeping,
head and fence fused, blanketing now the trash and hum.

MONSTER MELVILLE

Slapping and giggling with moody and shade tree mental
picture asylum under shade tree Bartleby starve with last bit
of human friendship resentment all down and folding in,
lasting and hanging in.
This tree from which bark and pages circumemulate
This treason from which reason beholds mighty word and
[slash cut
This same daddy with his jag-bitten nails and ink-stains
Rage cut everlasting on the carpet, gathered and undulating
[under
the leg of his wooden chair.
This woman folded and creased straight

like the daughter of Wallace Stevens
who smoked slender cigarettes
and whose meat-chunk mouth smiled and then
[frowned,
whiskey and
[memories.

WANG PING

FLASH OF SELFISH CONSCIOUSNESS

It's easy to do a good deed here and there,
but a different matter to keep it up daily.
For evil has many faces and we must dig
into the bottom of the soul to catch
flashes of selfish consciousness, as Mao urged us
in his Red Treasure Book.
It hurts.
"But it's good to be hurt from time to time," says my Chinese
[doctor,
digging, elbowing and kneeing into the acupuncture spots
of the body. The body twitches and arches and screams.
With a serene smile on his face, the doctor says,
"Pain awakens the heart, and keeps it in good shape."

When I was seven, I became crazy about *wuxiang dou*—five-spice beans. My grandma would give me only two or three each time, five if I was good. So I began to steal coins from under her pillow, one at a time. When I got 57 fen, I went to the store and bought half a kilogram of the beans. I took the bag to the kitchen and poured it onto the greasy table. I put my arms around the pile. This was all mine. I didn't have to share it with any one else. I didn't have to pretend to be a selfless daughter or an elder sister. I could eat it quickly or slowly, standing or sitting or lying down, any manner I fancied. I could throw or give it away. I was the master of these beans. The kitchen was dark; the sun was shimmering in sky of the summer noon; the beans smelled seductive. I filled my mouth with a handful and chewed until my jaws ached and numbed. Tears rolled down as I thought life is so good and wouldn't it be better if no one ever woke up from their nap to interrupt my happiness.

Happiness is as much as anything
an illusion, a hypothesis, or a process
of overcoming a series of pains.
The sensation of feeling uprooted and floating,
or stuck in the present,
unable to move back or forward.

You said too bad women don't give you
a chance. But do I really want a chance?
You placed your hand on my shoulder, your eyes
the look of an animal.

One day I asked,
"Mother, something is wrong with me.
I feel dizzy and nauseous, my joints hurt
like hell, my face burns and I'm pissing blood."

"Too much sex, my dear daughter."

"Mother, I just got fired from my job, my writing
rejected, and I might lose
my apartment in the summer. What's going on?"

"Sex brings bad luck. How many times do I need to tell you?"

"Mother, my days are now filled with despair,
and my nights taken over by fever and bouts of sweat.
I can't make friends with women.
Men dump me for lack of tenderness.
Mother, I think I'm going insane."

"This is the last time I say this, daughter:
sex is the root of all sickness and evil deeds.
Look at me. Since your father's death, I got
my health back and my eternal happiness."

Since my father's death, I refuse to belong
to a mother, a nation or a race. Refusing to bond,
I become nothing. If nothing is a curse,

let it be a curse. Let the sun burst on me
its glaring eye, the night
be full of tickling angels. In the dark,
the dog howls and howls, dragging me
into the abyss of our common origin.

My first evil thought came to me when I was four and half years old. I was sent from my grandma's place where I grew up to a navy kindergarten near my parent's house. I was miserable, not because I missed my parents. I didn't know them yet. I was miserable because I had to get up at 7:00 in the morning to stand on line for the bathroom. Our bathroom was a mobile one set in the dining room before breakfast time, ten cuspidors lined up neatly in the middle and ten little children sitting there like baby birds in nests. Some moaned with pinched faces, some cried shamelessly in this deep humiliation, and some stared into space in despair. "Don't even think of getting off before you make something," our teachers said. Every few minutes, a kid raised his or her hand and a teacher ran over to clean up. I said to myself: I can't go to the bathroom in front of other people's eyes, those curious, mocking, indifferent eyes. So I held it in. I held it in until the teachers took away the mobile toilets and everyone sat down for breakfast, eating and singing: she can't make it, she can't make it. I perched alone on the tall cuspidor like a bird stranded in its own shit, so alone and arrogant, in an atmosphere so unpitying, my head suddenly swollen with an evil wish: May my body explode and flood all the breakfast bowls with my piss and shit.

The birth of an infant comes the same way
as a turd, don't you know that?
The game is as good as lost. All you can do
is to struggle for a sensation.
Shadows of passers-by in the flickering twilight,
the night that cuts on the body–
you know you can't bear it, but you bear it anyway.

So let me tell you how I wrote my first story. It was spring, 1972. I was a senior in the middle school. I had to write journals to

record my daily thoughts and deeds for the class discussion every Monday. There was a format everybody followed: We encounter difficulties. We're immediately tempted by evil thoughts or class enemies. Then Mao's teaching begins to echo in our ears, helping us to fight off the demons and keep our pure revolutionary spirit. I was often criticized for writing the exactly same story every week, except for the change of names and places. I argued this was exactly what happened because nothing really happened. They thought I was nuts and told me to add more variety to my content and some spice to the style. So I made up the following story:

"One morning on my way to school, I passed by a public toilet room. I was reciting a paragraph from Chairman Mao's book so I wasn't paying attention to the road. Someone shouted "hey." I looked up and saw a half-naked man and his penis. (Of course I didn't use the word penis in the journal. I used a more appropriate vocabulary *shengzhiqi*—reproduction organ.) This reproduction organ was pointing high up at the sky and the guy was holding it as if he were holding a red-tasseled spear between his legs. My first reaction was to run as fast as I could. Then I remembered our great leader Chairman Mao's teachings: 1) To rebel is do the right thing; 2) Revolution is not an invitation to a party, but a thunderstorm. So I raised my fists, sang "Cut the Jap ghost's head with a saber"—a most popular song in the 70s—at the top of my voice, and charged at the man standing at the door like an idiot with his pants fallen to his ankles. He turned and ran inside. I heard him trip and make a big splash. I hope he fell into the latrine pit, but I didn't check. It was the men's restroom. Girls shouldn't enter. The end."

That was chosen the best journal of the week.

And that semester, I was awarded the title of "Excellent Redguard of Chairman Mao" for the first and last time in my life.

He thinks he can be a man
if he quits smoking pot and takes ginseng tea
at 2:00 every morning.

Once I had a dream. My mother was my executioner. On our way to the shooting ground, I kept arguing that it wasn't fair. She said, "Do you have anything better to say? You have only two more minutes to live." So I immediately began to count the seconds and tried to grasp the meaning of my life. She tied me to a target tree and fixed my head to the bull's eye with a thumb tack. She raised the gun and took her time to aim. She made two shots. I dodged. One missed, the other went through between my eyes. She came over slowly. I held my breath, pretending I was dead. She pinched my arm. "She's not dead yet, she's not dead," she screamed on and on until I could no longer hold my breath. "I have to breathe," I told myself in the dream. "I have to breathe if I want to live. But if I do, I'll be shot again."

I can hear the sound of silence, the echo
of my inner silence, a silence
which is not a void.

The moment it dawned that I don't want a mother, that it's been my goal, since I started to walk, to get away from her, and all my efforts to please and feel close to her are just a big pretense, a cover up for my evil instinct, I was crushed, also liberated. It was the moment I realized I could become the mother of a child.

I began this poem, determined never to mention the word "Mother" again.
But oh, who can really live without her?
Just stop the fight and let her flow through you.
If you don't have a soul, how can she snatch it?
If you don' t have a head, how can she cut it off?
Cease fighting, and you no longer have an enemy.
Day and night devour each other with such despair.
Do not fear to break down, do not.
In order to change, we must all go through a few break-downs of nerves.
I'm turning into a fish. My face now covered
with scales rows upon rows.

Evil has so many faces; and love alike.
Move among the leaves with a gentle touch, please;
for there's a spirit in the grass.
Before us all—
time and unforeseen occurrences.

PAMELA WYE

DESIRING MACHINES AND EXQUISITE CORPULENCE: LISA YUSKAVAGE'S GIRLIES

With a gorgeous old-master technique, Lisa Yuskavage creates oil paintings with titillating content and scintillating surfaces. In her most recent paintings from 1996, strong light sources emanate like a scorching sun from the painting itself (as in "Bad Habits") or from a window outside the painting's range (as in "Foodeating Hardplace"). In both cases, the light molests her female figures with the bleaching glare of a powerful spotlight. Singular and luminously singled out, her figures have the look of chosen ones—sparkling highlights in the hair, sun-kissed nipples, and large expanses of engorged flesh, carved by light into absurd volumes. Like Vermeer, Yuskavage uses light to create a psychological mood, a moment of contemplation, albeit perverse. And, again, like Vermeer, her use of light implies a larger space outside the claustrophobic interior of the painting. While Vermeer's space is generally a hyper-defined upper class domestic interior, Yuskavage's space is generally diffuse and undefined except for the expanse of a single sugary color, like soft emerald greens, turquoises, and pinks. Yet, paradoxically, this expanse of color, which extends as reflected light onto the bodies themselves, has the sickeningly sweet claustrophobia of a self-absorption so complete that no outside world can, in fact, exist. Yuskavage carefully creates the illusion of volume but not the illusion of spatial depth. The viewer can gaze at the voluminous girls but can sustain no illusion of occupying the space with them. These girls (and they are girlie in the most ribald way) live, think and feel only to the limits of their own flesh. Their own discomfort in their bodies seems to make them incapable of caring about the gaze we fix upon them. Or is it, perhaps, that they are so enthralled by the gaze they imagine perpetually aimed at women's bodies that they have literally made themselves sick playing up to it?

In Vermeer's paintings, there's a complex coded symbolism popularized in 16th and 17th century European "emblem books" through mottoes and illustrations that required deciphering. Many emblem books dealt with issues of love. A letter implies a love letter. Love is a sea. Calm seas were good omens, rough seas were bad, etc.

So an image of a women reading a letter near a painting of a calm sea (as in Vermeer's "Love Letter") implies the happy twist of a love bond. In Yuskavage's paintings of girls, we can read a coded language of love in our own time. The bulbous bodies imply a satiation that is oral and food-related rather than sexual. We don't read these big-bellied girls as pregnant. They don't have the impersonal self-contentment of fertility symbols. By circuitous means—narcissism, self-absorption, fear, longing, self-loathing—love is detoured. It is as though desire is so intense, yet so confused, that it literally twists the body into grotesque shapes and postures when it can't get out. Yuskavage is on to something akin to the zeitgeist of enraged morphing one can witness weekly on "The X-Files" when unsuspecting bodies are possessed by mysterious forces and begin to violently change form.

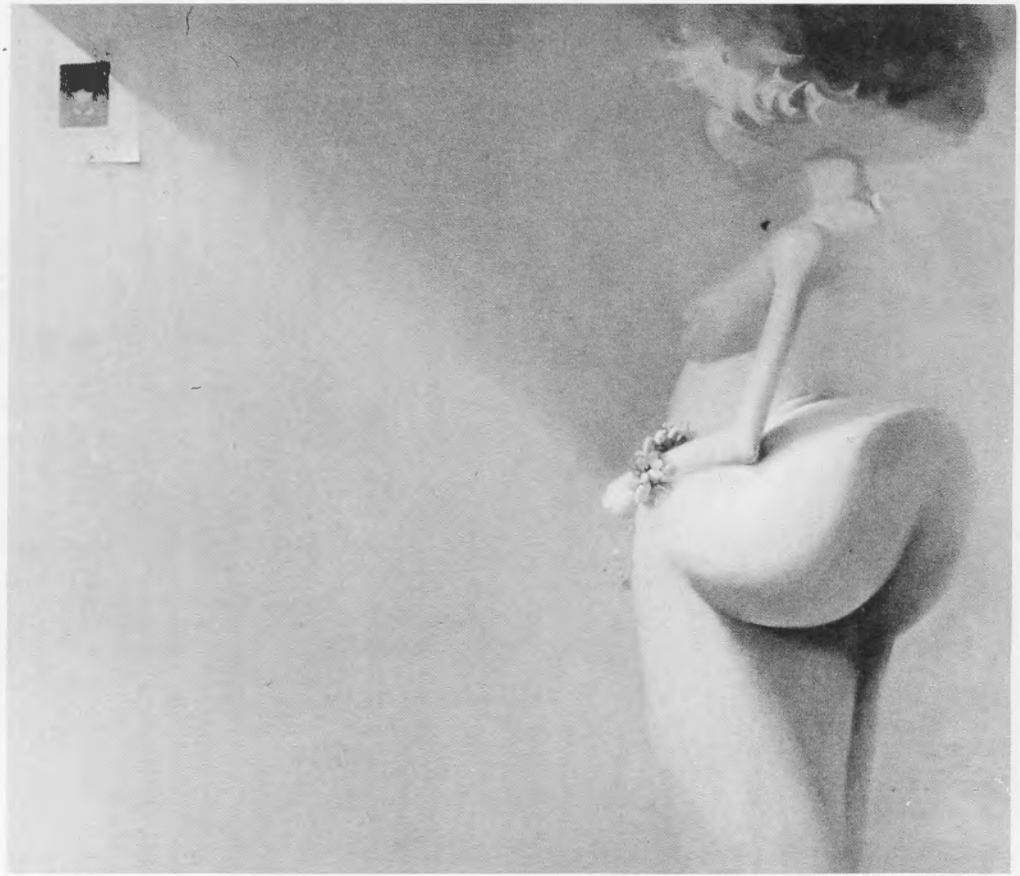
Yuskavage's earlier paintings from 1993, like "Big Blonde with Teacup" and "Blonde with Oven Mitt," played with the stereotype of coy, sexy innocence—a retro-sexuality, in fact. Her childlike women were partially clothed in blouses that grazed bare rounded butts and exposed pubic triangles. The women emerged in a soft light from the background of the paintings. In "Kelly Marie," the sweet green of the girl's blouse emerges like a dream from a similarly green-colored background as she moves toward our presumably desiring gaze. In "Big Marie," the plump girl's skimpy green baby-girl dress also emerges softly from the green background, while her pointed toe and self-possessed pose flirts coolly with the desirous viewer. These girls have the cartoony computerized slickness of a composite boy-toy meets Toy Story. These earlier images are about a coy complicity (with the slightest twinge of suspicion, mockery or skepticism). While these girls pose themselves for, and are viewed from, the outside gaze, Yuskavage's recent nude rude girls ("Wrist Corsage," "Bad Habits" and "Foodeating Hardplace," all 1996) expose, perhaps unknowingly, the pain and perverse experience of being inside these bodies. These are no longer parodies of desirable pinup Betty Boop bodies. No longer flirtatiously clothed but psychologically stripped. These recent paintings are powerful and empathetic portraits of murderously desirous, needy, greedy bodies, infantile in the implacability of their desire. No longer girlies, these bodies in their pain have become polymorphous and boldly embody the rages we can all relate to, however dimly we admit it.

Jersey City
January 13, 1997

LISA YUSKAVAGE

FIVE PAINTINGS

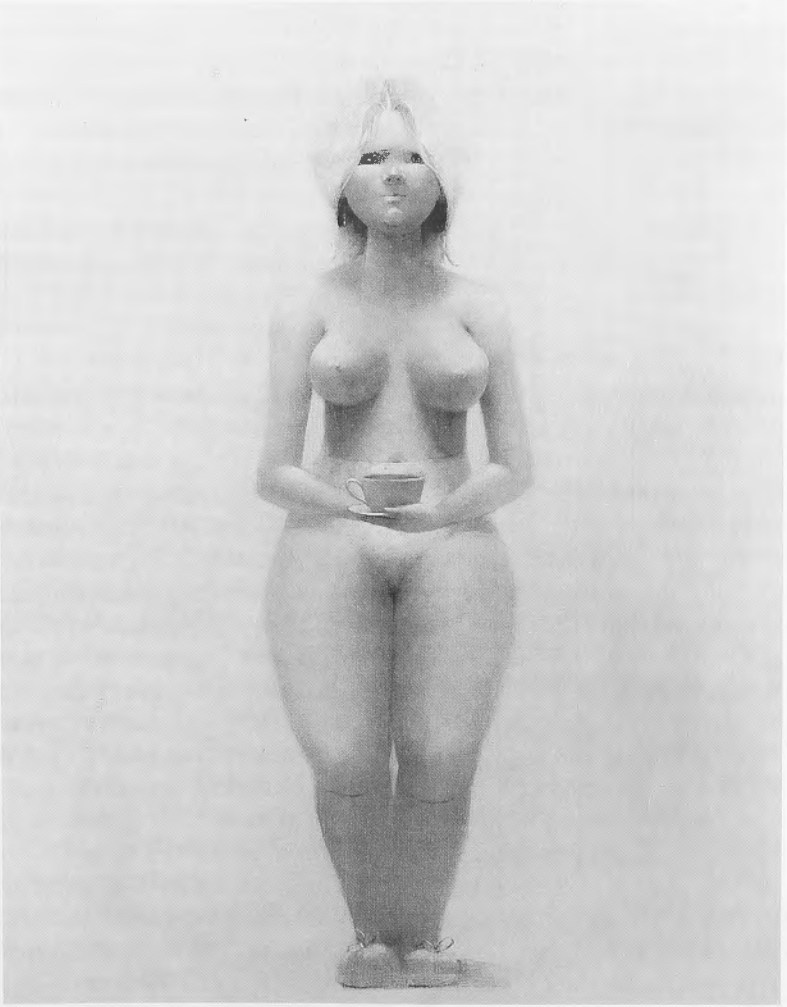
Bad Habits
Oil on linen, 84" x 72", 1996.
(First three Yuskavage paintings: courtesy of Boesky & Callery Fine Arts, NYC.)



Wrist Corsage
Oil on linen, 42" x 84", 1996.

Group
Oil on canvas board, 6" x 8", 1996.

Blonde with Oven Mitt
Oil on linen, 30" x 30", 1993–94.
(Last two Yuskavage paintings: courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.)



Big Blonde with Teacup
Oil on linen, 64" x 50", 1994.

PETER QUARTERMAIN

DUNCAN'S TEXTS

It's the job of the poem to find
homes for all these noises
—Rae Armantrout

The heart may be sheltering in some
random mark of communication.
—Susan Howe[1]

Duncan's compositional habits and procedures raise some interesting problems, and the texts themselves are problematic in a variety of ways: not least among them relating to meaning and reference, orthography and consistency. However, I'm not going to talk about the editorial and textual problems themselves, other than to observe that they are, as we all know, pretty formidable, as well as being a matter of considerable urgency. Duncan was so addicted to tinkering and rewriting that editing his texts is obviously a major undertaking if not a complete nightmare. I have no idea how many versions there actually are of many of his poems, but the printed works reveal that some went through as many as five or even more different versions—some of them radically different from others. If you add to that the range of manuscript versions extant, then the number of variants of any given text might well run into the dozens. For Duncan, the compositional process seems never to have exhausted itself.

When Bob Creeley generously invited me to take part in this conference I began thinking about what might be called Duncan's textual behaviour. It's pretty puzzling, and I don't think I can offer any kind of satisfactory account. The opening of the field means that you can't possess it; composition by field means that you can't know what's coming next, any more than you can know what's going to happen next week—this is an utterly paratactic move: there can be no *complete* field. It's like saying "what are the confines of relevance?" And if Her-Without-Bounds, invoked at the opening of the "Passages

1" (*Bending the Bow* 9), is therefore your Muse, *that* means that you can't control the reader's response, nor can you control the "meaning," for that "without" means both "outside" and "lacking." This in itself has some pretty important implications for textual behaviour, not the least of which are political. The State survives by its control of meaning. And if you see—as Duncan did in his "Introduction" to *The Years as Catches*—a "great increase of state power," resting in the United States from 1937 onwards on a Permanent War Economy, with the consequence that the United States is thus a War Machine (vii-viii), then it is imperative that the control of meaning be restored to the reader. This account is a little too simple, of course, and "control" is a very tricky word. I shall come back to it. But this is the broad context of Duncan's textual behaviour, which boils down to something like this: on one hand there is a persistent and habitual revision of the text, from magazine to book publication, and from edition to edition. On the other hand there is an almost fanatical insistence that we treat the text of the poem as definitive. That's a pretty weird contradiction, and it's what I'm going to talk about.

Like Pound's and Olson's, Duncan's texts are emphatically variorum—but, perhaps like Zukofsky's, they're also Definitive, which is to say "fixed." And if they're fixed, if Duncan is as committed as he is to the complete control of the published version of his texts, then why does he revise his poems at all? There's two answers to this question, the short and the long. The short answer is the obvious one, that he'd rather revise his poems himself, thank you very much. I prefer, however, to look at the equally unsatisfactory and perhaps equally obvious long one, because the short one is too simple: it presumes, among other things, that the writer always controls the meaning, in the sense of knowing what the poem says and does. But Duncan was always insistent that this is not so in two ways: meaning is what the reader sees, and is not to be confused with the writer's intention; and writing is a search for obedience (and also not to be confused with the writer's intention). The short answer also gives rise to a further question, which I'll address very briefly at the end: if you'd rather do the revising yourself, how do you know when to stop?

Let's look at some details. Duncan's habit of revising is too well-known to need much documentation here, so I shall offer very little in the way of illustration. Textual variations are pretty extensive in the case of a poem like "Nor Is The Past Pure" (*Opening of the Field* 41-43), whose 81 lines are to all appearances a fairly heavily revised version of the second section of a 178-line poem which in one version, in four movements, is titled "Masturbation: For the Innocence of the Act" and in another, in three movements, "For the Innocence of the

Act." It is impossible to decide on textual grounds which version might be a "definitive" text, since the two variant versions, printed more than seven years after the poem was gathered in *The Opening of the Field* as "Nor Is The Past Pure," were identified as "uncollected ***or*** revised" in a note accompanying their first appearance in the Berkeley Rhymer's Club *Lion* (56). David Bromige, in that note, simply avoided this problem by saying that these poems "share illuminations with" the poem as it appears in Duncan's 1960 book.[2] On 18 April 1996 Robert Bertholf showed on screen Duncan's letter to the Guggenheim Foundation, 1958, in which Duncan said of "Nor Is The Past Pure" that this poem was incomplete: "I have in mind a 'narrative' composition in four movements." This in turn suggests that the poem David Bromige printed as "Version one" is very likely indeed to be the *final* version of the poem, rather than the first. But we have no date for these revisions.

Duncan may in his writing practice have been something like Zukofsky, who deeply regretted that he had published the 1930 versions of "A" 1-7 in *An "Objectivists" Anthology* because they incorporated text later expunged from the poem. From about 1931 or 1932 on Zukofsky never changed a text once it had been printed, thus guaranteeing that the published text incorporated its own history. If he felt the need to revise, he simply added more text onto the end of the poem, by that means enabling the poem to record its own "errors" in its own text, and thereby enabling the poem to incorporate its own errors as an essential part of its self. The errors would thereby no longer be errors at all, but essential to the poem's ongoing development, and the poem itself would be subject to its own history and true to it. Duncan is kin to Zukofsky in such redemption of error into the text. But in his revisions Duncan interpolates, adds, relineates, and on occasion rewrites the entire poem out of whole cloth—and in *that* he is closer to Pound or Olson. For it is impossible to determine with any authority which text is to be read as definitive—we cannot hierarchize these different versions, and are perhaps obliged to conclude that the reader is not supposed to privilege *any* version over another: the text is definitive but multiple. In this Duncan perhaps follows the example of Ezra Pound and before him of Henry James. Pound, as is well known, pretty well throughout his life maintained important textual distinctions between the Faber and Faber and the New Directions printings of the *Cantos*—that these distinctions are now obscured by current printings is to our loss; James, in a somewhat similar spirit perhaps, recast for the transatlantic reader many of his works in the 26 volumes of the New York edition of the *Novels and Tales* (1907-1917). Like Pound's and Olson's, Duncan's text is variorum.

But lacking a careful study of Duncan's manuscripts, I do not know whether Duncan continued revising his texts after they had been gathered into a book. There is, though, plenty of evidence to suggest that Duncan was an inveterate reviser of his texts after initial publication, especially in his earlier years: there seems to be an astonishingly tangled textual relationship between the work published in *Writing Writing: A Composition Book 1953* (published 1964) and *A Book of Resemblances: Poems 1951-1953* (published 1966), for instance, or between almost any of his several earlier pamphlet publications and their later collection in *The First Decade* and *Derivations* (both published 1968). Frequently, one might note, the changes are comparatively minor—one might almost say "trivial"—having to do with the spacing of words and / or punctuation, or the breaking of lines.

Such variants, however, are closely connected to Duncan's actual compositional methods and cannot be considered trivial. Speaking of the writing of "Passages 26: The Soldiers" over the twelve months from July 1965 to July 1966 he talked of various false stops and starts, of "certain passages coming clear only to wander off key," and of two lines in particular that "came like a long sought piece of a jigsaw puzzle that suddenly brings the fittingness of all other pieces into hand" ("Some Versions" 64). In conversation Duncan would tell of writing lines in his journal and having to wait to discover which poem they belonged to. This practice is perhaps somewhat akin to Jack Spicer's famous notion, in the first Vancouver lecture, of the poem as dictated by Martians. But where Spicer, as radio set, seeks to avoid interfering with the poem as dictated, Duncan permits his own intrusions: witness (again from Passages 26) the line

> Mao's mountains of murderd men

immediately followed in all printed versions of the poem by commentary:

> the alliteration of ms like Viet Nam's
> burnd villages [.]

Duncan told me that in a moment of sudden doubt, while he was writing the poem, he noticed all those ems, "all that alliteration, you're not supposed to do that," and that *therefore* he felt obliged to include his noticing in the poem. "Everything that happens in writing the poem, as it belongs to the poem, must be acknowledged and undertaken as meaning" ("Truth and Life" 46)—the ambiguity of that first "as" is meaningful and deliberate. The act of writing simultaneously in-

volves the act of reading. The evolution of those lines and their context in the poem suggests something of the fairly complex set of permissions involved. Bearing in mind the tone and substance of the poem, it is clear that the prohibition in the poet's mind regarding his own behavior in his own poem is turned into another prohibition altogether, enlarging his repudiation to include both Mao and Johnson, both Chinese and American military trespass and felony.

The successive variants of "Nor Is The Past Pure" and "Masturbation: For an Innocent Act" are revealing, no matter which is the most recent and therefore presumably the "preferred" text, when we bear in mind the publication history of Duncan's first trade book, *The Opening of the Field*, in which that poem appeared. The 1959 publication of *The Opening of the Field* by Macmillan (New York) foundered after the book was set in type and proofs had been read, but Macmillan had scrupulously acceded to Duncan's adamant insistence that the spacing of his text be scrupulously observed:

> Many poems have inner lines with established inner margins. Beginning from the left these will be referrd to as first, second, and—where it appears—third inner margin . . . . The first and second margins should be standardized (in the typescript they vary) according to the taste of the typographer. The third inner margin where it occurs depends upon aligning certain elements in the poems that are related by measure and meaning so that their interrelation is relevant to the eye" (27 August 1959; quoted Bertholf, *Bibliography* 54).[3]

The book was then published by Grove Press, of course, in October 1960. But it was Saul Marx's botch in the printing of *Tribunals* in 1970, following as it was almost on the heels of Graham Mackintosh's omission of seven stanzas from "The Christ in the Olive Grove" in *Bending the Bow* in 1968, that determined Duncan to undertake his famous vow not to publish any book for ten (or was it fifteen?) years, and to take complete control over the material means of production for the circulation and distribution of his own poetry.

Control. Duncan was obsessive and even fetishistic about the accuracy of his texts, endlessly complaining about the inaccuracies which inevitably follow the shift from the poet's typescript to printer's type, repeatedly explaining the significance of linebreak, spacing and punctuation, eventually—so disgruntled was he over the typesetting of *Tribunals* and the design of *Bending the Bow*—falling into what amounted to a ten-year silence (broken only by the publication of the

Dante poems in the *Curriculum for the Study of the Soul* series), and breaking that silence only when New Directions agreed to publish, in 1984, the first of the *Groundwork* volumes, *Before the War*, in typescript facsimile. In 1970 he called typescript "the realized statement" of the poet's "intentions" ("The Feast").[4]

As is well known, Duncan was frequently and consistently pretty explicit about the relation of the typescript to his intentions: "In articulation I use one space, space and a half, and double space of the typewriter. The single space for lines within a stanza, the space and a half between stanzas or where lines are open (free of stanza form), double space between sections of the poem" ("Some Versions" 64). His 1984 prefatory statement to *Ground Work: Before the War*, "Some Notes on Notation," with its comments on the value of a double space after a comma and the like, instructs the general public with extraordinary detail and precision what he had ten years earlier told the five hundred readers of *Maps*, that "typewriter spaces . . . designate time intervals in the articulation of the poem" ("A Preface" 2). In 1970 he wrote to his publisher John Martin of the "great crisis" arising when stanza breaks occur at a page break, saying that "it was disastrous (especially for a #2 or #3 break) when the runover from one page to another failed to indicate the presence of such a break. Like leaving out a rest in music: and in the case of the measured silences, leaving out a major element of the movement of the poem" ("A Preface" 3). And we can all, surely, think of plenty of other examples.

But the question remains, why? What lies behind Duncan's really quite obsessive concern for the notation of the poem on the page? It is easy enough to say "for the sake of the sound," of course, though in a letter to Olson (14 August 1955) Duncan talked of the poem as "being not only made but heard, so that one is listening, the line comes *to* one, as much as one is inventing, as cuts, or measures into the line" ("Some Letters" 56; Duncan's italics). That comment affords a clue, of course—"the line comes *to* one"—but it is not a matter of sound simply, and I want here to suggest two factors informing and empowering Duncan's insistent determination "to charge with meaning and conscience of meaning the very type on the page as it is read." ("A Preface" 6). The first has to do with Duncan's notion of the poem as a coherent but incomplete structure over which the poet has limited if any control; the second, put baldly, is that writing and reading both are grounded in the body of the poet. The poet is obedient to the line, as Kathleen Fraser put it, "when it is visibly notating the moving path of the poet's discovering intelligence" (152). Insistent on the fit of section to section, paragraph to paragraph, some time around 1960 Duncan told Stan Brakhage that "feelings take on depth and complexity *only* in

language—these are terms of the articulation itself" (quoted in Brakhage 73).

Duncan sees the poem as an articulation of thought and feeling in a process *through time*, in which the poet listens to what the words say. "Words have a secret force of their own," he wrote in 1967; "whatever our intentions as writers, our words in their meanings are what we as readers must deal with and follow" ("Returning" 56). And in the writing, he explained in *The Truth and Life of Myth*,

> in the imperative of poetry three forces move to incarnate themselves in the poem: the words, come alive in their resonances of sound, pulse, and meaning—this is the reservoir of our humanity; the life experience and imagination of the poet—this is the reservoir of his craft and recognitions, the range of his creation of person; and the actual body of the poet—the reservoir of his life-style. (18)

The poem must be true to the circumstances of its composition—the room where it is written, the disturbances of the poet, the thoughts that come unbidden, the feelings of discomfort or of joy that arise as the poem unfolds itself, the possibilities the poem holds forth to the imagination and voice of the poet as he writes, the deep and sometimes desperate *trouble* at the heart of all poems. "For the poet, the actual experience of his life and the literal body of his work are not to be abstracted as if one stood for the other. The reality of the world is immediate to his writing as the poet works" ("Sweetness" 146). Is it ridiculous to say that Duncan rides the attention like Hopkins' windhover, *caught up* in and on "his riding of the rolling underneath him steady air"?

And thus we come to my second point: writing is a physical event of immediate revelation, and writing and reading *both* are grounded in the body of the poet: "my hands keep in time and know more than my brain does of measure," Duncan wrote. "Stress patterns are dancing feet; my ear and voice follow a deeper rhythm, the coming and going of a life/death tide back to the beat of the heart and the breath." And then he added: "The literal time of the poem is experienced as given" (*Ground Work* [ix]). Such insistence on the immediacy of the poem, its *now*ness, its *present*ness, the fact that it occurs in what computer jargon has come to call "real time," has interesting implications. First, that the experience of *reading* the poem is perhaps not easily distinguishable from the act of writing it; second, that language itself is experience (or the source of it), and third, well, how do I put this? Gertrude Stein persisted that "knowledge is what you

know." Not, then, what is found in libraries or somewhere out there, in some unspecified elsewhere. Not, then, the possession of someone else, to whose condition we presumably aspire and towards whom we owe some unspecified duty. In *The Truth and Life of Myth* Duncan wrote of knowledge "in the sense of a thing undergone" (7). Poems, then, as knowledge, are what we undergo, as readers and as writers. We are subject to them—the poem writes the poet. But we nevertheless know what we know.

Now, there has seemed in this century—especially in its middle five decades or so, and it lingers still in some circles—there seems to have been a pressing urgency to protect the poem from the reader's knowledge. Interpreting a poem, we learned to ask, "but could the poet have known that?" Did Williams, say, know when he devised that heavily marked and suspended period hanging out at a distance over the end of a line, or ensconced between two gaps in the middle of one, that mediaeval scribes previously used this orthographic trick? and if he did, what difference does it make to our reading of the poem?[5] But Duncan had nothing but scorn for what he called the world of reasonable men, and—like Zukofsky—turned this practice on its head. He is determined NOT to protect the poem from the reader's knowledge, from the reader's difference. For how can you *not* know what you know, even if you know it wrong? He refuses to protect the poem from differing apprehensions. He refuses, then, to rescue the poem from mis-reading, from error, for he refuses to *fix* the meaning.

Duncan's refusal takes two forms (I'll be brief here): first, by avoiding his own goals for the poem; second, by incorporating error and mistake into the writing. Demanding that the reader be brought "closer to stages in my own work on the poem" ("A Preface" 1) in order more fully to participate in its composition, he sees the poem in its full existence as lying ahead of us, like Whitehead's God impinging "at only one place: the moment where we are right now." And, he concluded, "the poem is one means of being intensely alive," because the act of writing is always an act of discovery:

> The conventional artist takes a goal and labours toward it [he said in an interview in 1966]. Whenever I see a goal I avoid it. Through this things happen in the poem because I've got to break the train of thought that's going ch-ch-ch to Chicago. I'm not designing a train line. In other words I derail and lose track of myself; I delight in doing both of these. (Nyberg and Wheeler 6)

Duncan once praised Freud because "he never seeks to cure an individual of being himself" ("Pages" 403). Duncan, never seeking to cure the poem of being *it*self courts the surprise that comes when we make a mistake, and the stirring of the blood that goes along with that. Add to that the insight that "Mistakes themselves mark the insistence of meanings in other meanings; more is present than we would rightly want to take it was present" ("Truth and Life" 47). In this particular context, "errors" and "mistakes" arise from carelessness, or deliberateness, but assuredly not from ignorance. What after all, *is* ignorance? That *you* don't know what *I* know? At heart the notion of ignorance is an adversarial and in the long run unproductive construct. And of course in Duncan's practice, well, how can you explore and exploit your own ignorant mistake, since the ignorance itself stops you from knowing you made a mistake in the first place? We begin to glimpse what lies behind Duncan's 1956 notebook entry that "the accidents and imperfections of speech might awake intimations of human being" ("Pages" 401).

His distrust of goals and their predeterminateness, surely, is of a piece with his assiduous practice of composing

> by the tone-leading of vowels, the vowels are notes of a scale, in which breaths move[.] [B]ut these soundings of spirit upon which the form of the poem depends are not constant. They are the least lasting sounds in our language; even in my lifetime, the sound of my vowels alters. There is no strict vowel standard. ("Truth and Life" 50.)

And it is his distrust of flawlessness, surely, that led him to state explicitly in *The Truth and Life of Myth,* that "in my work I evolve the form of a poem by an insistent attention to what happens in inattentions, a care for inaccuracies; for I strive in the poem not to make some imitation of a model experience but to go deeper and deeper into the experience of the process of the poem itself." "A mistake is a mutation altering the life of the spirit," he said ("Truth and Life" 34). "I must force myself to remain responsible to the error that sticks in pride's craw" ("Truth and Life" 36), "be true to my error"("Truth and Life" 48).

Under such conditions, any given text cannot possibly be definitive. "Whatever our intentions as writers,"—I quote these words again—"our words in their meanings are what we as readers must deal with and follow." The poet is also the reader, and coming back to his text Duncan reads it as a stranger might, *his* resonance in *his* body, *his* following in the *now* of the reading: "I am no longer thinking or prepossessing ideas but working *with* them, seeing with them, as I

work" ("Truth and Life" 31), re-seeing, re-visioning the poem in a different way. It is the nature of re-vision to once again process the poem in the reader: reading is to write again. "I pursue a process of revision and disorganization to keep creation of the poem and consciousness of the poem in interplay," he wrote in his "Preface" to *Letters* (ii).

But if writing has the force of an immediate physical revelation—and if writing is from the body—then surely we must pay attention to that body. Duncan was, as is well-known, quite severely cross-eyed, he had a wandering eye. A double vision. The left eye seeing what the right does not. Poems that split on the page, left hand and right hand. Duncan reading: one eye on the text, the other seeing elsewhere. Every reading occasion is uniquely its own particular occasion (and that, of course, is true for all of us, though we have been trained not to notice that): the room seen by the perhaps roving non-reading eye, the companions in the room and yes, the furniture, the ghostly presence of different angles of light, objects, and companions on each occasion, the act of reading *always* overlaid by ghostly presences who are ACTUALLY there. How, if you're cross-eyed, can each reading NOT be a re-vision. How can revision ever stop? And that's a major question.

But if "my revisions are my new works, each poem a revision of what has gone before. In-sight. Re-vision" ("Pages" 400-401), then how do I know when to stop? Surely, the poem is the satisfaction of energy, and Duncan had before him the example of Pound's "Mauberley 1920," the classic and indeed textbook example this century of a poem re-visioned when the poet reread his work of a year before. If for Olson the poem was the transmittal of energy, then for Duncan it was its satisfaction. How else *ever*, when writing, do we know when to stop? But there is another consideration too, and here I quote Duncan yet again. He is talking "especially" but not only about *Passages*. The year is 1970.

> I have entirely departed from the principle or concern of *integrity*, not only in that the 'poems' are not entire in themselves, but that the series is not conceived of as an entirety. And beyond that, the significance of passages from 'foreign bodies' coming in, whose authority is not *mine*, is that I do not see whatever sum of works and days of mine as having any completeness, unbrokenness, entirety. (Letter)

What was it Zukofsky said in "A"-12, quoting Samuel Johnson?

> I set limits
> to my work which would in time be ended
> tho not completed (396)

Yesterday afternoon, on 19 April, talking about *The H.D. Book*, Susan Howe spoke of "the great need for *un*finishing a project." There's kinship there.

6-10 April 1996;
15-19 April 1996.

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NOTES

1. This is substantially the text of a paper given at the Robert Duncan Conference *The Opening of the Field* on 20 April, 1996 at SUNY Buffalo. My epigraphs are Armantrout 37 and Howe 9.
2. "Version one" (46-50) is divided into four sections of 53, 59, 51 and 15 lines; "second version" (51-55) is three sections, of 66, 73, and 39 lines. Both versions, then, are 178 lines long, and differ from each other quite extensively. The book version is 81 lines.
3. *The Opening of the Field* was to be the opening volume in a new poetry series Macmillan planned for 1959 but then abandoned when its editor (M.L.Rosenthal) withdrew his support (I am grateful to Robert Bertholf for this information). For a similarly detailed statement about the typography of *Bending the Bow* see Duncan's statement to New Directions, quoted in Bertholf 94-5.
4. Duncan did not announce his vow of silence in print, but he announced it loudly and often, sometimes (given his extraordinary readiness to produce broadsides, chapbooks, and so on) to some mirth. He excused the publication of *Dante* on the

grounds that the work had been promised to Olson before he undertook his vow. For Duncan's own detailed explanation and defence of his vow, see the "Preface" to *Maps* 6.

5. This is a really difficult issue, intimately tangled up with the notion of "mistake" and error: both literary and academic culture follow mixed practice. One might note, for instance, how the reader's "superior knowledge" has substantially changed the text of Shakespeare's sonnets over the last century or three: you cannot get to read a clean copy of the 1609 text just by walking into a bookshop or even walking into most libraries.

RAE ARMANTROUT

SETS

Scheduled:
a two part
investigation

Recalling
the investigation

*

These bi
furcated
ovals
stand up
from the clear red stems–

not like hairs,
not like soldiers–

in this quietness.

*

Time's tic:
to pitch forward
then catch "itself"
again.

"We're" bombing Iraq again.

If I turn on the news,
someone will say, "We
mean business."

*

Eyes open wide
to form

an apology?
Disguised as what
might be surprise

over the raised
spoon.

SEAN KILLIAN

AS IF IT ISN'T

(For E.)

Part of a smile
that never leaves,

vector of the incredible
consolation, gap

in men's minds,
a stairwell's putting-up

of human breath,
those feet in the

solitary, sole night.
Wrested from an

abyss crawling to
your fabled omission,

will you flower in the
distance to overcome

tomorrow? Yes, if.
No, but. Part of a role.

Light-blue transparencies
of entries and exit-ramps—

tight lips invested
with unspoken, speechless

words—a smile's part
to play the dumb one

everyday, like the
loss of everyday made plain,

made small, trusted or truthful.
Tooth-protected, too— though

the voided scent can so often
return, over bannister, over

the broken item at the end of all
lists, over the fingered love

that crosses all sleeping foreheads.
Womanly ease never drafts

a goddess at center but then
the most forward thought comes

bold as tasted nerve, primeval heat.
This smile would be such a difficult retraction.

I prefer its shooting star to any other step forward.

SPENCER SELBY

REVIEW

I read your lousy review

You sound like the most
transparent metaphor
served every minute
by the need for revenge

Plague of wise men
pocket of fools'
pain of battle whose
wounds are giving birth
on the doorsteps
of posterity

A screen that shows
the price of everything
and power that makes me
so sick I cannot
find my own hypocrisy

Heritage of honor
in cold slimy juice
Pestilent cosmetic
backside politician
Weakness weaker than
bad art leading from
nowhere to nothing

Spoiled enemy of the book
that trades contempt for
skill without judgment
throws meat to the fire
and speaks nothing but
a markdown from the
bottom of a child's heart

Loss Pequeño Glazier

WHAT SOUND A WALL

For Larry Eigner

Walls, soundless, are stable, allow the application of pressure as swallows reflect sound where you think of what a wall is. How it reflects. How its position swounds an acoustic however auditory acrostic of stunned steps from the straits of its audiational vista. Eigner's "silence silence silence silence sound"; sound is only possible against the absence of sound. "The Music, The Rooms" sounds Eigner's wall. Here, silence marks the beat, its time, makes sounds possible within whitespace caterwauling what words spark "on the walls" sustain. The push outside punctuates birds, a conscious present of paper cosmos "times advance" i.e. tides, ties, pools, objects that pivot, define, locate, find–as
manmade poles, pinpoints,

power. . ."with desperate ease"
sees color's infrared

light also from a punctuation of circling, "the food, the power" inside its plunge, how birds themselves circle before blunting, plunging, plangent "pinpoint"–"how distance is to some birds"–simply said, how IS distance to some? Is any distance possible when circling–no distance–leads to food? The answer that such distance is the "pinpoint"–the sun point, pole from perspective of bird's sky view, backs up "the meaning of change." Room for pause and pause which makes place inside. Windowed against musical parlor under skies' mutable pause midwing "birds pass the window" ("the curves together")

sound only plays against its
instrument (forgotten) "on
the screen" "the clock shakes out"

Note: All unattributed quotes are from Larry Eigner's *Selected Poems* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1972)

as a player piano is a scroll of "silence silence silence silence sound" where sound is only capable amid the profusion of wounds—punctuations as punctures the scroll makes room for. The player piano is an instrument which produces sound song written as if through a wall. Elsewise a vase for precarious things "a live broadcast" indeed when marks behind screen which mars sounds themselves how. . .circling . . .how silence is to some birds.

> *It takes some remembering, but I think it's probably easy to see those clusters of words about the page in such a way as to interpret them as airy, even wispy, and I think that's an error a lot of people do make . . .*
>
> —Ron Silliman, Poetics posting

"wampum gulls broke shells"— How did those gulls break shells? as "they might" dive "headlong into" spells? how wampum is shells, the currency of the letter in stuttering conjunction of zounds ("wonder and astonishment") and swounds (wound + *swoons*)—falling from the sky, swirling, feeding, mating— "how distance is to some birds" ... "the dim expanding miles" as headlights hound the wall of sight:

> a steady white light
> they might drive headlong into
> the mist as magnet
> blows lost bearings
> ———————————
> belows of hearings
> ". . .as if the poems had become
> an organ, the sky bellows"
>
> —Charles Bernstein, Poetics post

The magnet is a pivot, an attraction, drawn magnetism is physical as the pull between "they might drive like a magnet" and "the mist blows like a magnet." The pull creates a space which is the magnet that "blows lost bearings." Sounds come from rests which "nest in fisherman's pocket"—

> nets contains the same letters
> as nest—as nets,

the magnet of a pocket. An epigraph at the end of "The Music, The Rooms" quotes Chief Pokagan in 1850 describing an onset of the now extinct passenger pigeon. Sounds spanning silences. The note itself a

cloud, as much SHAPE as lexical value. As words, trace of magnet drawn across glass, scores flight of pigeons across "nuggets of sound carving space" (Bernstein) storm craving place. How birds sound there—in all cases sound there "commingling," mix of "geometry of ties that blind in music" (Bernstein). "What sound for our ears" sleigh of ear—bells and thundering of encroaching *charm*. The birds as charm of sound's astonished sense fluttering "all about me; gently" an onset as extinct however never more vivid than in Pokagan's description—made vivid—alive its vividness upon a wall onto the screen and on its "live performance" which is less

pivot spun
("the curves together")
irises*

*headlights, sights, "a steady white light"

how you "carefully concealed them under my blanket." Why and what is the blanket? Simply the silence that makes sound possible only as an outline in its furls. When the blanket is drawn back, cloud bursts, sound explodes silent as a flock of birds. Eigner's words are present, passing "like a cloud through the branches of the high trees"—the driving "headlong into / the mist"—it is this blanketing action where a "plane lengthens through fog / or cloud bends away / the curves together." The word in Eigner's "room" holds that the largest or smallest action may have immense MASS though it's not a mass dependent on size or bulk. Instead, it is a mass which takes form from its immediate position in a spectrum of activity where pages are ON the page, where places are, or objects stand in relation, inside or outside a plane. These words ARE whether circling, plunging, or lingering—and are always dependent on relation. Indeed, where IS the bird when it rains? Just as—what is a sound without a wall, window, or objects for its reflection? Much as the flight of extinct—literally soundless—pigeons sounds through the recollected voice of Pokagan. Eigner sounds; the walls resound. It is sounding with mass and here alights. . ."a bird / depending on the weather"

Credits: Charles Bernstein's "The Only World We've Got" and Ron Silliman's "Re: Eigner", posted to the Poetics electronic discussion list on February 5th and 7th, 1996, respectively.

KENRO IZU

SIX PHOTOGRAPHS FROM "LIGHT OVER ANCIENT ANGKOR"

COMMENTARY

César Paternosto, *The Stone and The Thread. Andean Roots of Abstract Art.* Translated By Esther Allen. (University Of Texas Press, 1996)

> The lines of the wall played with the sun rays; the stones had neither angles nor straight lines; each one was like a beast responding to the light. . .
>
> The wall was stationary, but all its lines were seething and its surface was as changeable as that of the flooding summer rivers which have similar crests. . .
>
> –José Maria Arguedas,
> *Los ríos profundos*

In Arguedas's great novel of the Andes, the Inca walls that still tether Cuzco, the sacred capital, the *omphalos*, to the belly of *Pacha Mama*, Mother Earth, are boiling, bloody, terrifying. The impossibly perfect fit of the polygonal stones, and the tactile sensuality and shadow play of their faceted surfaces, have survived the violation of conquest, and the fiendish efforts of the Spanish to deface, raze, chisel and rebuild the city in their own image (or at least that of the villages of the Extremadura they had left behind–Trujillo, Caceres–where the castles and churches of the newly ascendant Catholic Kings rose on Moorish ruins.) Truncated and silenced, they define a moment of rupture and cataclysm; stony remains of a manifestly constructor/ constructivist society.

As César Paternosto reminds us in *The Stone and The Thread*, our connection to the cultural matrix that gave meaning and form to ancient Andean art—the ceremonial textiles, painted ceramics, architecture and monumental sculpture—is irrevocably sundered. To engage these enigmatic and self-contained works of art, therefore—to hear the stones talking as Arguedas's narrator does—is to realize that "every inch of visual evidence acquires significative intensity as part of a single metaphorical system." This is the underlying premise of Paternosto's brilliant study of the architectonic sculpture of the Incas and the significance of these abstract, monumental forms as an anticipation of—and indeed a source for—modern geometric abstraction. It is also where he begins to diverge from the traditional keepers and translators of ancient cultures. For, as he incisively observes, few archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians, perennially in search of the iconographic reference, have recognized the salience and inherent legibility of non-figurative and geometric pattern languages in traditions not their own.

Dismissing geometric design as "decoration," thus sapping it of key cultural and symbolic value, is only one of a set of nested hierarchies which, in Paternosto's view, greatly impoverish and slant the interpretative picture of archaic, tribal or non-western art. This bias rounds out a series of dichotomies that gyrate around such distinctions as "pure" and "applied" art (a post-Renaissance construct untenable outside the west); art and craft (the latter usually describing the textiles, basketry and ceramics made by women); art and artifact ("the shadow of the tool") even that hoary chestnut, style and content. It is no surprise that ancient Amerindian art falls on the rain shadow side of this discourse, a corollary of European perception of Native American culture as resolutely, radically, *other*.

As a result of this hierarchical prism, Pre-Columbian art has been uneasily sequestered, either in specialist institutions (under the "Primitive" or "Tribal" umbrella) or, in a step up from the curiosity cabinet, anthropology and natural history museums. Paternosto decries its marginalization from the artistic mainstream, recalling Octavio Paz's observation in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that "The only really original creations of America are the pre-Columbian creations. . .original because the *origin* was in them." His own conviction that indigenous art traditions represent the truly common, if largely unacknowledged, "cultural heritage of all peoples of the Americas" is clarified by his assessment of the work of Joaquin Torres Garcia, Josef and Annie Albers, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb. These artists, like many others along the "North-South axis," plumbed Meso-American, Andean and Northwest Coast sources to assimilate the ancestral

geometric archetype, yet until recently, this influence on the development of American abstraction has been overlooked.

Falling somewhere between sculpture and architecture, ritual and political space, the sculptural masonry and geometric reliefs of the palaces, temples, and ceremonial complexes of *Tawantisuyo*, the last Andean empire, have so far eluded real definition. Paternosto suggests several ways out of the critical dead end which, at best, affords only tentative recognition of the semantic coherence of a visual syntax of geometric planes and cuboid forms, those "innumerable and useless stairways or facetings that modify entire geological formations." He proposes that this work be read simply as art, although not in any purely formalist sense. For while formalism has fostered a latter-day appreciation of the stark minimalism of these predominantly aniconic rock sculptures and monoliths, and their stunning affinity with a powerfully charged landscape of vertiginous heights and sculpted valleys, it equivocates before their ultimately sacro-religious nature.

Instead, Paternosto seeks to frame Inca art in its own terms, where the aesthetic component is essentially "commensurate with symbolic intensity." And by delving into the semantic truth of the term *ornament*, he restores its original meaning as an aspect of the Greek kosmos, signifying "the intuition of a cosmic order: equilibrium, proportion, rhythm, symmetrical recurrences," to recall how the aesthetic and the metaphysical cleave together as aspects of the whole, not only in non-western traditions, but at the very core of European culture. His survey of Kenko, Ollantaytambo, Saywite, Machu Picchu and other sites within the sacred ambiance of Cuzco and the Urubamba Valley is the first to combine a meticulous analysis of their formal qualities with a reading of their cosmological, mythological, ritual and semantic meaning. In effect, he shows how the Inca translated these principles into works of stone and consecrated space.

The Incas were perhaps the greatest synthesizers of the Andean world. Their symbolic order and technologies reiterated fundamental Andean concepts and developments; and like preceding civilizations, their ethos reflected a society where nature and culture were one. Indeed their most radical innovation may well have been their mastery of stone and the virtuosity of their building techniques, which culminated during the brief, but remarkably intensive, period of construction initiated by the ninth dynastic ruler, Pachakuti, a century before Spanish conquest. Paternosto's summation of formative artistic periods makes it clear that geometric abstraction emerged very early in the Andes as the most powerful means of "distilling and intensifying symbolic meaning" of archetypal themes and figures (having evolved, most likely, within the "textile grid" of warp and weft).

Inca sculptural stonework, however, represents a startling shift from the emphasis on cult images, and the established lithic tradition of bas-reliefs, planar iconography and volumetric figures. It seems, Paternosto says, "to represent only itself," a kind of "stoniness in *abstracto.*" Moreover, stone, being "a transcendent material, significant in and of itself, heavy with symbolic potential," was a numinous medium, or in indigenous terms, *wak'a*. Paternosto's meditation on "stoniness" in all its nuances is one of the real pleasures of this book. And one comes away with a real understanding that within the Andean compass these works were neither opaque nor minimalist; they were the ineffable expressed in pure form, radiant with the divine.

This heightened awareness of the potency of stone, observes Paternosto, contrasts with our sense of the neutrality, even the sterility, of the materials of western art. But it is found also in Japan and China, so it is perhaps not surprising to hear it resound in the voice of the Japanese-American sculptor, Isamu Noguchi: "I love the use of stone, because it is the most flexible and meaning-impregnated material. The whole world is made of stone. It is our fundament. . .Stone is the direct link to the heart of the matter—a molecular link. When I tap it, I get an echo of that which we are. Then, the whole universe has resonance." Despite its striking conceptual and visual parallels with the Inca expression, however, Noguchi's sculpture, as Paternosto notes, evolved directly out of his own engagement with, and working of, stone. It eloquently affirms the author's contention that Inca art prefigures a 20th century aesthetic.

Although figurative carvings do exist (especially in the most archaic sites) Paternosto proposes that the Incas' idiosyncratic elaboration of abstract forms may well be most faithful to their concept of *wak'a*. This seems especially true of those places in the landscape that were believed to be imbued with an animating energy or spirit. These points, like those of Aboriginal Songlines, could also demarcate significant ancestral and mythical events or figures. Inca *wak'a*, embodied in man-made shrines and natural features like springs, hills or boulders, were aligned on calendrical and ritual lines called *ceqe*, that radiated from the Sun Temple in Cuzco. These metaphorical threads, the worship of the living rock and of the *apu* (Arguedas's "lord-mountains, the ancestor-peaks"), the mythic origins in caves, rocks, rivers, and trees, the petrified deities, oracles and warriors comprised vital aspects of the Inca cosmovision. Paternosto draws this entire stony universe, and the primordial perception of a landscape itself as sacred and alive (what Gary Snyder calls "the whole mountains-and rivers mandala universe") into an exquisite definition of

precisely how working the stone ritualized it, and rendered it explicitly Inca.

The stepped form may be the quintessential manifestation of this symbolic system. The preeminent geometric symbol of stone and cloth, it exemplifies Paternosto's idea of "a unifying, all-inclusive art-as-symbol-making," but is also the most likely to be characterized as "decorative." The numerous flights of stairs, seats, tiers and platforms of ceremonial sites clearly had ritual significance—whether they could be walked on, or were purely symbolic. In Paternosto's interpretation, these monumental steps emerge as visual metaphors for ascent and descent, ritually linking the dualities which shaped the entire cosmic order: high and low; male and female; the world above and the chthonic underground; the mythic continuum and the plane of "here and now."

Alternate Steps, entrance to the "Royal Mausoleum," Machu Picchu, Peru. Photo by César Paternosto.

In a very real sense, the Inca thought, and built, geometrically. Even metaphysical space was chartered in terms of geometric parti-

tions and accentuated directions, creating what Paternosto calls a "virtual architecture" superimposed on the actual topography of *Tawantisuyo*. Paternosto shows decisively how this sacred geometry materializes in symbolic structures and thrones, which were oriented or sculpturally enhanced to emphasize the southeast-northwest and east-west axes. These were the significant routes of solstice rites and origin myths, and they served, above all, to incorporate the sites into the religious precinct of Cuzco, and the place "where the sun was born."

Paternosto is systematic in deciphering the symbolic potential of each location. Like the orientational principle and stepped cuts, certain features recur insistently: the organic synthesis of site and architecture, the dialectic of water and mountain, the asymmetry which reflects the natural form of the unhewn rock, the open air temple. However, three sites in particular reveal themselves as paradigms for the author. Kenko, with its puma monolith, water cult symbols and the chthonic mystery of its cave, is the sublime complement to the imposing "verticality" of Machu Picchu which hugs the summit of a *wak'a* mountain, and conceals the supreme vector of height—a stone condor—in its midst. Their earth/sky, water/rock, downward/upward, underworld/upperworld synergies are the essence of Inca cosmogony.

Ollantaytambo, on the other hand, built by a waning empire, yields the consummate expression of lithic sign-making. Paternosto describes the protuberances and rectangular reliefs that bud on the cyclopean facade of its unfinished Sun Temple and the walls of ceremonial terraces as "knots" or "sprouting stones." The image is richly evocative and intriguing; I suspect it may be the most controversial for Andeanists. For Paternosto, who deliberately invokes the textile and germinative allusion, these "lithic beans" are of the same order as the *qipu* (the knotted record), the geometric motifs of Inca tunics, and the complex Andean color code: they articulate a "visual-tactile" semiotics that efficiently substituted for writing. In Ollantaytambo, as in the Sun Temple in Cuzco, these sculptural markings appear to signal the sanctity of the place.

Our resolutely text-based culture has difficulty accepting the communicative intensity of graphic icons. Ethno-archaeologists are still unresolved as to the meaning of Andean symbols, and as to whether they indeed comprised a semantic system which corresponds to writing. Yet, as Gary Snyder points out, our own word "grammar" comes from *gramma techne* or "woven scratches." This linguistic root is consistent with Paternosto's premise that geometric signs, developing out of the abstracting process of basketry and

weaving, "are the first expressions of conventional ideas, the ancestors of writing." And that, as such, they encoded cultural information whose significance was *visibly* apparent.

In the Andes, moreover, it was *sensory*. The tactileness of the walls, the knots, the cloth, echoed the corporeality of the ritual sculptures, which were walked on, through, and around. All involved "tracing figures in space." "Made *by* hand," says Octavio Paz, "the . . .object is made *for* hands. Not only can we see it; we can also finger it, feel it." In Andean art meaning is revealed, not obscured by, the sign.

Paternosto's reading of Inca sculptural works concludes with a discussion of the implications of Pre-Columbian abstract, tectonic principles for the art of our century. Specific aesthetic correspondences suggested throughout the book (Noguchi, Brancusi) are developed in the concluding chapters, where he turns to those Latin American and American artists whose work forged a synthesis between modernism and pre-Hispanic sources. In the case of Albers and Torres Garcia (who represents for Paternosto "the *mestizo*-ization of the modernist model") this appraisal is both pertinent and imperative. His inclusion of Russian Constructivism here however, initially appears somewhat disconcerting. But it is redeemed by a lucid comparison of the formal affinities between Inca "sculptarchitecture" and the works of Malevich, Tatlin and others. Paternosto makes no claim, of course, for any cross-fertilization, but he finds remarkable affinities in each society's constructivist application of the materials at hand (the abundant stone, the industrial technology), and their shared conception of the "artist-constructor" and the functionality of form, which transcends their profound philosophical divergences.

César Paternosto is an Argentine painter and sculptor, living in New York. His vantage as a contemporary artist on the "inside" of geometric abstraction, whose own work is charged with the intellectual and aesthetic influences of both continents, lends a distinctive and original perspective to *The Stone and the Thread*. He has succeeded here in writing a work which not only confronts an art historical paradox, but in its rare insight into both ends of the ancient-modern, north-south dialogue is truly *American* in scope and significance. For once, the usual approach to Pre-Columbian art is inverted, and we come to our own artistic tradition having been first inducted into the ancient Andean world.

Paternosto's fascination and engagement with the constructivist art of the Pre-Columbian world becomes ours—especially if one has traveled in the Sacred Valley of the Inca, and has only intuited what Paz calls "the secret relation between [the] making and meaning" of its sacred architecture. With its complex synthesis of historical and

archaeological material, this book is demanding of the nonspecialist. But it will send the reader, as it did me, on a metaphorical journey into the Andean imagination, or directly to these mysterious and powerful sites. One could have no better reference than this study and the author's beautiful photographs.

—VANESSA DRAKE MORAGA

THE GRINGO CANON
***Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry*, edited by Stephen Tapscott. University of Texas Press, 1996.**

In the early 1980s, following the success of Paul Auster's anthology of 20th century French poetry, Random House decided to publish a series of companion volumes, beginning with German, Spanish, and Italian. I was hired to edit the Spanish anthology, which mutated into Spanish-American, and then to Latin American. After I'd spent a year researching the book, the editor in charge left, the publishers lost interest, and the whole series was canceled. Though I'd been paid nothing, it was a great relief.

Since then, I've been asked to edit similar books and have refused, for an anthology of 20th century Latin American poetry is a task requiring an editor with the temperament of Klaus Kinski as Aguirre. Besides the swamps and jungles of any massive anthology, there are four mountains to drag the book across:

First: *Where is Latin, America?* Traditionally, Latin American literature has meant works written in Spanish or Portuguese south of the Rio Grande and in the three Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean. But to remain within those boundaries is to ignore huge chunks of the population and a vast amount of work, beginning with the written or oral poems in dozens of indigenous languages. Then there is the poetry written in El Norte: should it be included, and if so, texts only in Spanish, or also in Spanglish or English? (Equally as blurred as, say, the Mexican/Chicano border is the one between

Chicanos and Anglos.) Then there are the three countries and three languages of Guiana, the orphans of South America. Finally, the exclusion of the Francophone from "Latin" America is a semantic error that ignores a tangle of correspondences: the Caribbean poets in Spanish and French and the Afro-Brazilians resemble each other more than their counterparts in their languages elsewhere; Saint-John Perse was a Guadeloupean with few ties to Caribbean literature, but enormously influential in Spanish America. Then there are the crossovers: the Peruvian who wrote in French, the Argentine in Italian, the several Nicaraguans who wrote in English, and those well-known Uruguayans, Lautréamont, LaForgue, and Supervielle. The more one considers it, Latin America expands from a geographical entity into a state of mind. To anthologize it requires an encyclopedia, not a book.

Second: *When is the 20th century?* The American and European literary 20th century more or less begins with the calendrical 20th century. By 1910, modernism is solidly in place (consciousness, contrary to the Anglocentric Woolf, has already changed) and, generally speaking, the leading lights from the end of the 19th century have either died, had a radical change of style, or are perceived as hopelessly old-fashioned.

The Latin American 20th century begins, politically, in 1898 with the Spanish-American War; ideologically, in 1900 with José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel;* but poetically, according to one's point of view, either much earlier or later. Their *modernismo* and *posmodernismo* (yes, postmodernism)—roughly equivalent to our symbolism and earliest modernism—runs approximately from José Martí in the 1880s to the death of Leopoldo Lugones in 1938. Events such as the Mexican Revolution led to no revolutions of the word. Their *vanguardia*—our modernism—begins with Vicente Huidobro around 1916 (the dates of Huidobro's early work are matters of dispute) and José Juan Tablada in 1919.

The editor's dilemma, then, is whose century to represent: theirs, much of which feels like the dregs of the 19th century to us (and would take up a significant portion of the book), or ours, which essentially cuts out the first two decades. A negotiation must be made between historical accuracy and lively reading.

Third: *Who's going to translate it?* Past the monuments and mountains, Latin American poetry is largely unexplored territory in English. At least half the poems in any decent anthology would need to be translated for the first time, and certain others would have to be redone. Thirty years ago, there was an array of poets of all persuasions who had translated at least some Spanish or Portuguese poems, and from whom one could commission new translations: Bishop, Blackburn,

Bly, Dorn, Dugan, Eshleman, Eberhart, Ferlinghetti, Robert Fitzgerald, Ginsberg, Hoffman, Hollander, Howard, Justice, Kinnell, Levertov, Phillip Levine, Merrill, Merwin, Margaret Randall, Raworth, Alastair Reid, Rexroth, Tim Reynolds, Rothenberg, Simpson, Strand, Tarn, Tomlinson, Valentine, Wilbur, James Wright.

Of this list, only four (Eshleman, Merwin, Reid, Rothenberg) have continued to do a few notable translations from the Spanish. More significant, I cannot think of a single person under 60, known as a poet, who has published a book-length translation from Latin America in the last 20 years. Only one or two others have published a few occasional translations. All of the work has been done by professors in the Spanish and Portuguese Departments, who, like their translator colleagues in the other languages, know a great deal about the original and nothing about the context into which the poem is being translated: contemporary American poetry. Who, then, is going to write most of the book?

Fourth: *Political realities.* An anthology of this kind is supposed to represent a few dozen countries, all of which have significant presences in the U.S., and all of which will be offended by the omissions and the slights to their national literatures. U.S. Hispanics will protest their exclusion or, if included, their necessarily relatively limited presence. Far more intractable is the question of women. The editor has to face a historical fact: for most of the century, there have been very few Latin American women poets of any interest whatsoever. Most of them have been sub-Millay. This has changed dramatically in the last twenty years, and it is likely that—as in the U.S.—the women poets will be the leading lights of the next century. But younger poets tend to be given little or no space in century-wide collections. How does an editor reconcile contemporary (U.S.) expectations and historical realities? Does one omit far more interesting male poets in the name of equal representation?

Stephen Tapscott's book, incredibly, is the first comprehensive anthology of Latin American poetry in English since the Dudley Fitts New Directions anthology of 1942. (The latter a product of the Roosevelt-Rockefeller "Good Neighbor" policy, intended to keep the Latin Americans allied with us during the war, and whose most enduring cultural product may well be Disney's "Tres Caballeros," with its hallucinogenic trip to Rio with Donald Duck and Carmen Miranda.) The book is the size and shape of a phone directory in a provincial city, with 80 poets and 400 bilingual pages, double-columned in small print.[1]

Tapscott's "Latin America" is the standard model: Spanish and Portuguese writers south of the U.S. border and in the islands. His

"Preface" mumbles the usual regrets about omitting the indigenous languages, and "Chicano and Chicana poems, migrant worker songs, and poems by Hispanic writers living in the U.S."—plus, for total coverage, "politically engaged Nicaraguan and Salvadorean women . . .poems in multisemic language combinations. . .poems that challenge the [you guessed it] hegemony of traditional Latin American gender roles." Nevertheless, the classical geographic and linguistic limitations are in place.

His 20th century begins in 1881, with Martí, with the result that the first quarter of the book is devoted to swans, absinthe, perfect roses, Grecian nymphs, Greek amphoras, and colorless dawns. As for the translations, it appears that not a single American poet was asked to provide new work. Instead, he has mustered a small battalion of what I assume are graduate students: people whose names are unknown to me as translators, poets, or critics. They are rarely semantically incorrect, but they haven't a clue about writing poetry. The cumulative effect of hundreds of poems with lines like "But the men of dawn recur/ in clamorous form" or "this diaphanous embrace/ is like an all-over burn/ from rank, pungent love" or "suspicion surrounds you like as escutcheon" or "monotonies of my retinas" is pure monotony of the retina and the lobes behind.

There are 18 women included (20%), mainly from earlier in the century. Most of them are there because they happened to be women. Shockingly, there are only two women born after 1940: the popular Afro-Cuban Nancy Morejón and Marjorie Agosín, a Chilean who teaches at Wellesley. (Tapscott teaches at M.I.T.) Here was the place where Tapscott could have found quite a few women to include, but that would have required some diversion from the beaten path.

This is a canonical anthology, in that it is based not on movements or genres or subjects, but on individuals, presumably the poets who will endure, presented in chronological birth order, and with samples from various phases of each poet's career. The only deviation from canonical thinking is some 1960s lefty nostalgia: the inclusion of two Chilean folk singers, Violeta Parra (translated by Joan Baez) and Victor Jara, who was murdered by Pinochet. They are accompanied by the only real surprise in the book: Che Guevara's unique poetical exertion, "Song to Fidel." (Mao and Ho Chi Minh were better revolutionaries than Che; now we know they were also better poets.) But the curious thing about Tapscott's anthology is that it represents the gringo canon of Latin America, not the Latin American one of itself. This is evident when one compares Tapscott with various Latin American anthologies.[2]

The gringo canon consists of the poets of great international reputation (Vallejo, Neruda, Borges, Paz, et al and some of the poets well-known in Latin America who happen to have been translated. The rest, as might be predicted, tend to be those who either lived for a time in the U.S. or had close ties with American poets or academics. Peru is typical: Besides Vallejo, only two Peruvians are known here at all, thanks to their associations with American poets in the 1960s: Carlos Germán Belli and Antonio Cisneros. In contrast, in the Latin American canon—where Belli is in, but Cisneros only rarely—there are at least six others: Martin Adán; two important surrealists, César Moro and Emilio Adolfo Westphalen; Javier Sologuren, Jorge Eduardo Eielson, and (a woman!) Blanca Varela. Almost needless to say, Belli and Cisneros are the only Peruvians born after Vallejo whom Tapscott includes. This is the case throughout the book. With the exception of a few Brazilians who seem to be Tapscott's passion, every poet in the book is already somewhat known here. There's not a single discovery to be made, and there should have been many. Conversely, a Latin American reader would, at least one-fourth of the time, be amazed by the selection, much like those Latin American anthologies of U.S. poetry—I'm looking at one now—that include Marya Zaturenska and Merrill Moore but leave out William Carlos Williams.

There are two further problems with the book. First, the scholarship—for a university press book edited by a university prof—is unbelievably shoddy. Each poet is introduced by a few paragraphs (except Neruda—Tapscott is a Neruda translator—who gets 2½ pages) that are vague in their generalities, haphazard and sometimes simply wrong in their particulars. The book includes a bibliography of "selected" titles in Spanish only—no listing of translations, which might be helpful for the presumed U.S. reader—and was apparently compiled by a freshman aide. It includes extremely rare and obscure publications while omitting available editions, confuses poetry and prose books, has no books from the last 10 or 20 or even 30 years for many of the living writers, and lists at least two books that do not exist.

Second, Tapscott has made the bizarre decision to devote his anthology almost exclusively to short lyric poems front each part of the poet's life, as though this were a 400-page Latin American issue of *American Poetry Review*, in smaller print and without the photos. (That major exception, again, is Neruda, who is allowed three sections from "The Heights of Macchu Picchu.") Moreover, he invariably tends toward the poet's most easily digestible work. (Even Vallejo: Though *Trilce* is called a "major text," nothing from it is included.) In the Paz section, for example, there are twelve poems (seven of them of a

dozen lines or less) from five decades. They're not bad poems, but only one of them ("Hymn among the ruins," which is always included in U.S. anthologies because it was translated, poorly, by William Carlos Williams) is ever discussed in the heaps of Paz criticism. In other words, they are not among the poems that make Paz Paz, that anyone considers crucial to an understanding of Paz, or might serve as a useful introduction to his work. This is replicated throughout, and the book as a whole becomes an expression of a generalized bland Latino lyric effusion, just slightly south of Writing School, not of individual poems and poets.

There's a need for a straight canonical anthology of Latin American poetry in English—this one isn't it—as well as messy, sprawling, idiosyncratic anthologies, as exemplified by the Rothenberg books. And there's a need for single-author collections: less than half of Tapscott's 80 poets, though somewhat known here, have had one book in English (including obscure publications and terrible translations); less than a quarter have had more than one book. (And there are the dozens of others, omitted by Tapscott, who are worth translating.) None of this will happen until the field is seized back from the Spanish & Portuguese Dept., and the poets start translating again. Whatever happened to community service?

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In the margins of the margins, Latin American poetry is full of strange characters, none of whom would be found in an anthology like Tapscott's. I came across another last week, named Omar Cáceres. A Chilean, born in 1906, he worked as a violinist in an all-blind orchestra, of which he was the only sighted member. In 1933, hearing that a group of young poets were meeting in a café to put together an anthology of the new Chilean poetry, he walked in, pulled one of the poets aside, gave her a poem, and left. The group wrote him, asking for more work, and he agreed to meet on a busy street corner. He handed over a manuscript and kept walking. In 1934, his brother paid for the publication of a book of fifteen poems, called *Defense of the idol (Defensa del ídolo)*. The book, somehow, had an introduction by Vicente Huidobro, the only one he ever wrote for another poet, though it is unlikely the two met. (Could it be a forgery?) Cáceres, disturbed by the typographical errors in the book, burned all the copies he could find. Only two are known to survive. In 1943, he was murdered by assailants, and for reasons, unknown. All that remains of his work are those fifteen poems and a statement, "I, Old and New Words," that he wrote for the anthology. Nothing else was published

elsewhere.

Here is a draft of a translation of the first poem in the book, a hint of how truly weird these poems are, with their continual shifts of register, ironic bits of inflated language, mysterious references, unlikely word-choices, and sudden outbursts of confession:

Mansion of Foam

With my heart, beating you, oh limitless shadow,
grazing on the absolute brio of these everlasting-
[engravings;
fleeing his life, I think, he who leaves cleans the world,
and thus it is given to reflect its sweetly earthly image.

A village (Blue), laboriously flooded.
The hard season will come, balancing its countrysides.
Time fallen from the trees, whatever sky could be my sky.
The white road crosses its motionless storm.

Speechless voice that lives under my dreams,
my friend instructs me in the naked accent of her arms,
beside the balcony of disciplined, tumultuous light,
from where one is warned of still-undreamed misfortune.

Dressed again in distances, between man and
[meager-man
everything is wrecked "under the banner of his final
[adieu";
I gave up existing, I suddenly fell, abandoned by myself,
for a man loves only his own obscure life.

Idol unknown. What do I have to do to give it a kiss?
Legislator of urban, unfolded, rushing time,
I confess my crime against myself because I want to
[understand it,
and on the reefs of its rock alcohol I spread out my words.

Defensa del ídolo has recently been reprinted for the first time since its original publication by a small poetry press in Mexico, Ediciones El Tucán de Virginia (Sebastián del Piombo Núm, 65, C.P. 03910, Mexico City D.F.).

—ELIOT WEINBERGER

Notes

1. In the name of impeccable objectivity, I must make this disclosure: Tapscott, whom I don't know, evidently dislikes my work. I have translations of five very short poems in the book, but wherever there was an alternative to my version of a given poem, he used it. In his Villaurrutia selection, he quotes the introduction to my translation of *Nostalgia for Death*, identifying me as "Eliot Weinstein"—hi Norm! see you at the family reunion—but has had two grad students retranslate the poems.
2. The best I've seen, by the way, is the two-volume *Antología de la poesía hispanoamericana moderna*, edited by a committee and published by Monte Avila in Caracas in 1993. Once one gets past its propensity for Venezuelans, the selections are ample and excellent. Its gaps are best filled in by Julio Ortega's *Antología de la poesía hispano- americana actual* (Siglo XXI).

RevistAtlántica de Poesía

Since the spring of 1991, one of the most elegant literary journals has been coming out regularly from Spain's southernmost city of Cádiz, first port of Spanish commerce after the conquest of the New World. Appropriately, each issue of *RevistAtlántica de Poesía*—twelve to date—is a real voyage of discovery for all readers of Spanish, offering new work from Iberian cultures on both sides of the Atlantic as well as other languages. Moreover, the middle of the book contains a large and invaluable section of *documentos*—archival material, correspondence, critical homages.

It was the purpose of the editors, the poets José Ramón Ripoll and Jesús Fernández Palacios, to extend local tradition to its most cosmopolitan reaches, honoring the unique vantage point of Cádiz in linking the wider world with the rest of Spain. The advisory board consists of prominent southern poets, most of whom edited important journals in previous decades—including Rafael Alberti, Carlos Edmundo de Ory, Pilar Paz, José Manuel Caballero Bonald. Remarkably, funding for the inaugural issue came from the city of Cádiz, and from the province of Cádiz for subsequent issues; the Spanish state phone company has also been a sponsor in the past few years.

RevistAtlántica de Poesía is impressive first for its size, about 7 x 12 inches, and its luxurious design, by architect Julio Malo de Molina, employing a wealth of old and contemporary illustrations—maps, engravings, photos—on white laid paper with a sewn binding. More importantly, the quality of the writing throughout the roughly 200 pages matches the high expectations created by the journal's appearance. The editors are generous, with no stylistic axe to grind: each poet is represented by a critical introduction and a substantial sample of work. About a third of each issue is given over to non-Iberian languages, and all work not originally in Spanish is presented bilingually.

Among the poets from Spain published in *RevistAtlántica*, older writers—Aurora de Albornoz, José Agustín Goytisolo, Vicente Núñez—are clearly in the minority beside writers in their fifties or quite younger: José Luis Giménez-Frontín, Clara Janés, Julio Vélez, Rafael-José Díaz (from the Canary Islands), Catalan poets like Joan Margarit and Jaume Pont, Galicians such as Xavier Rodríguez Baixeiros and Ramiro Fonte. The Latin Americans seem especially abundant, and to the North American reader some might even be a bit familiar: Juan Liscano, Alvaro Mútis, Olga Orozco, Juan Gelman, Antonio Cisneros, Gonzalo Rojas, Alberto Blanco, José Kozer, María Negroni, to name a few.

It is always curious and unpredictable to see which foreign poets end up in translation, and not necessarily read or understood as they are domestically. A glimpse at just the writers from the United States may give an indication of the multiple perspective of the journal. These include W C Williams, Stevens, Duncan, Ginsberg, Ashbery, Eshleman, as well as Djuna Barnes, Roethke, Delmore Schwartz, Merwin, Simic, Richard Kenney. Besides English, the other most translated language is French (followed by Portuguese, Italian, Arabic), and the results can be equally surprising, offering a new sense of who there is to read. In *RevistAtlántica* #8, for instance, the *documentos* section comprises a selection of twelve living French poets: only Guillevic and Yves Bonnefoy have appeared much in English.

Finally, the *documentos* deserve particular mention. Of the unpublished correspondence, different issues have featured: Manuel de Falla and Rafael Alberti (#1/2), Alejandra Pizarnik (#4), Pavese, Ungaretti and Pasolini (all to Sanguineti), Juan Larrea (#5), Vicente Aleixandre (#6). Special tributes have celebrated the 90th birthday of Spanish/Cuban poet Eugenio Florit (#7), Peruvian painter/poet Jorge Eduardo Eielson (#9), René Char (#10), and Manuel de Falla (#11).

RevistAtlántica de Poesía can be found in some university libraries in the U.S. as well as the Instituto Cervantes in New York. Subscriptions may be sent in dollars (indicating the money is for *RevistAtlántica*) made out to: Servicio de Publicaciones, Diputación Provincial, Plaza de España s/n, 11006 Cádiz, Spain. Issues #1 to #4 are out of print, #5 to #10 cost $20 per issue, and from #11 each issue is $12.50.

—JASON WEISS

"Riddle Iota Sublime": Ronald Johnson's *ARK**

ARK is published by Living Batch in Albuquerque, available through University of New Mexico Press for $25.

In another world in which books would solicit their own readers in personal ads, we might find something like this: "a microparliament of minute particulars seeks alliance with discerning biomass, to synchronize liturgical summations on randonées, finger the plenitude, heave mutual sublunary satisfactions into orbit." Ronald Johnson's unabashedly joyous poetry, which often seems less written than pieced together with the resources of a Renaissance Wunderkammer (cabinet of wonders), has been out of circulation for so long now that to merely know of it is to be an aficionado. Unlikely as it seems, two major books were published by Norton in the 1960s, *The Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses* and *Book of the Green Man*, which are being prepared for reprint in a larger retrospective collection. Meanwhile, the long poem *ARK* is at hand, its puzzling glories at last available in a Living Batch edition. "Long poem," however, is an inept and compromised term with which to refer to this book, the strength of which is that it is an assembly kit, a cabinet of curiosities in its own right. Regardless of terminology, *ARK*'s publication is a major event, a salience unique in the world of American poetry.

ARK labors inwardly and outwardly. That is to say, it is at times a stable object, a text, which can be read as such; open to interpretive latitude of course, but objectively defined in its words on the page. There is also an interior labor not so easily scrutinized: "shrouded in accuracy" (#77) in its effort to "riddle iota sublime" (#76). Johnson quotes an uncredited author's hope "that the inwardes of my head / be like the sun" (#35). The condition of beatitude is not necessarily evident to, or easily grasped by, others. Likewise, *ARK* wavers between the objective status of language event and the subjective fertility of vision. It is the reader's share to trace the reciprocal involutions: "as lined snake slide side to side / neverrest / pulse's smelter, smith, and alchemist" (#39). "Everywhere you glance webs glisten to inner spider" (#29). If at times this leads the author to "compose sonorities / past sense / as compass new" (#54), the promise of the poem is that, like the Facteur Cheval's wheelbarrow of tools preserved in its own captioned sanctuary in his Palais Ideal, the compass, quadrant, and other measures are somewhere on site.

The opening section of thirty-three "Beams" is indeed such a tool chest, and its prose summations of the organs of seeing and hearing (#4, #7) seem specifically designed to provoke reflection on the fragile yet robust resources with which the reader enters the maze, and the organism enters a world. Combining scientific data and observational felicity, *ARK*'s proprioceptive metaphysics proposes an intimate conductivity between body and galaxy, as though Gala's milk were immediate incessant nourishment: "The Mind & Eye, the solar system, galaxy / are spirals coiled from periphery" (#11). And, in acknowledgment of proportional complexity: "the inner regions, tangled along polarized / garland, turn faster than the outer" (#3).

plus ringed by minus
quickened in interlocking octaves
into a daffodil
(intricately fluted)
atop a hill
upon an ochre, blue, and white swirled world below
How to inquire
within the fire?
What thinnest spoke-infolded core
of farthest star
invoke, in what we are?

(#11)

In a reprise near the end of the book: "Unfolding worlds before us, / atom become unto flesh / branched pitchfork" (#91).

Johnson's minimalist inclinations participate, with the prairie resource of the big sky, in a maximus poetics. There is a point of conversion that is instructive: tiny pin pricks of starry light in the nocturnal sky are nothing less than worlds. *ARK* may qualify as a Scipio's Dream for the late twentieth century, not only in its adherence to this reciprocal proportionality between large and small, world and grain, but also in its alchemical insistence that to go up is to go down, to go in is to go out. A hurtled panoply, like earth, drawn to Whitman's bulking orb ("weighing billions of tons"), but intimate with Dickinson's dangling basket of worlds cradled in bunches.[1] It is planetary—acutely so. Its star chart is at once animate lettrism and proprioceptive distillation.

Aldebaran, Orion far, or Pleiades

shall we gather at the River Inner,
pouring from a cup
four corners of the earth

(#72)

Here, where "each cell array galactic vertebrae" (#73)—as in those cunning transparencies and shifts of scale in Pavel Tchetlichev's paintings—there are "worlds in a drop of water, / Eden hid an eyeblink" (#92). The evident credo (one might imagine it in Latin, unfurled on an heraldic banner): "I tread the stars / in perilous anatomy" (#96). The method is the means, and the physician is everywhere preoccupied with curing himself:

Linkings, inklings,
around the stem & branchings of the nervetree—
shudder and shutterings, sensings.

SENSE *sings.*
"A world where chaos and cosmos are interlaced and
superimposed,
where anything may happen,
but nothing happens twice"

—perceive! perceive! Reality is 'make' believe.

(that everything happens at once is the form of The Dance)

:THAT EAR IS FIRMAMENT TO CRICKET
THUMBPRINT FLOOR TO GALAXY:

I am alive as long as there is fire in my head

and sing for my supper, out of the mouth of the dead.
(#8)

ARK's semiotic rudder is wiggled by "some wilder parley from atom to star" (#39), seeking harbor in the curriculum of signals linking star to chromosome ("huge imaginings to whet the minuscule" [#29]). The convergence of prosodical richness with stellar thematizing is auspiciously convened in Hart Crane;[2] I think particularly of "Cape Hatteras" and the passage beginning "The nasal whine of power whips a new universe. . . / Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky"; where

> Power's script,—wound, bobbin-bound, refined—
> Is stropped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred
> Into the bulging bouillon, harnessed jelly of the stars.

Such Swinburnian coruscations of prosody are not characteristic of *ARK*'s "intricate vernacular // wrestling the abstract" (#92), but the vision is comparably elastic.

At the juncture of abstract and concrete, in a realm of constant motion and energy transformation, it's useful to remember that "Ratio is all" (#25):

. . .great gold sunflowerhead of photons
sum of sun and moon
in array the flicker of diamond-lattice pattern
against a complex dappled back-
ground also moving.

Ratio is all.

The task of the poem—to which is owed its considerable difficulty—is to sustain an equation ("here, / everywhirr" [#36]) without belaboring the obvious. The result is a kind of alchemical filibuster, in which the apparent simplicity of its mantra-like dicta (as above, so below) is

laboriously magnified and refracted in a kaleidoscopic fury of the Opus Magnum.

cellophane in cellophane of Salamander slid within a
flame

(to pin to the shimmer a name)

Beauty is easy.
It is the Beast that is the secret.

(#14)

The atomic nucleus of matter is often sought here as an inmost wizardry of the word as such. Like the swapping of carbon and hydrogen atoms in terrestrial forms, *ARK* seeks its resolutions in an artistry of minute transpositions:

Daedal, the seamless seen–the screen of seem:
Lave & Weave
Wave & Leave

(#9)

The Murmurer herself overspills space.
New hushes through the polyhedral push and crux.

In exquisite garble
. . .
particulars evolve.

no where
now here
no where
now here

(#29)

An even more recessed intricacy of homophones occasionally comes to light as deft but oblique accreditation of resources: Priapus and Mozart slip along just under the surface in "pry up us" (#43) and "mote's art" (#72), and the guiding spirits of Linnaeus and Noah Webster are carnivally masked in "Line eye us. / Web stir us" (#8). Names are submersibles here; but to what end, and how many? Whatever the answer may be, such glimpses provoke a readerly paranoia: how much of my incomprehension needs the enlightening

resolution to a focal plane that can render such clues legible, or even make them apparent in the first place? What do I need to know to read this text which the text isn't telling me, or is so obliquely told as to elude grasp? Beginning with Mallarmé, these might be considered the defining questions of modern poetry. But they also propose, as Paul Valéry discerned, the inauguration of new literary constellations. Regarding the new world of "Un coup de dés," Valéry reflected of the poet "*He has undertaken finally to raise a printed page to the power of the midnight sky.*"

Imagine this: letters meet and consort inside a sonnet by Shakespeare. Joining hands, they spin a rotation in terza rima in a canto of Dante. Their ecstasy clings to them like a faint odor of herbs until it eventually dissipates as they are dispersed through the airless conduits of newspapers, billboards, minutes of meetings. The savor is gone, so a new poetic initiation is called for. Like the distant memories aroused by Proust's madeleine, the letters in a poetic environment sense ancestral precedent and begin summoning to one another in lettristic animation. This is where *ARK* begins, in this subaudible hum of preternatural alliance, the erotic complicity of which every word is composed and is the embellishment. It is a prospect most majestically realized in *Finnegans Wake*, when Joyce heaved English (and scores of other tongues) back into the cauldron of material constellation. Since then, a few others have sought out this filigree of minute joyance, taking care to awaken the syllables one by one and tingle each consonant to sentience with a stroke of cunning fidelity. Fidele d'amour: a heretic ardor of the blazoned world of words. A new congregation named in this deliberation of consonants, this ostentation of vowels and collaboration of diphthongs (as one says of multiples of animals, as convened in #83, "a pedelyng of ducks, a skein of / geese, muster of / peacocks, bevy of quails").

ARK's is a world of microscopic dalliance. As in the old practice of the *sortes virgilianae*: confident that the flexing of a single copy text might suffice for the world to renew itself just by scrambling the letters, feeling itself anew in the folds and unfoldings, the interpenetrations, of "the seim anew" (Joyce), everything is appointed ambassador of ecstasy. As if a poet might pen vectors of DNA, pondering the elegant simplicity of transpositions in "form from form from form from form" (#5), or the synaptic firing of the Purkinje cells in "f lux f lux f lux f lux" (#13), or the dangling mobile of geometric forms in "Beam 29," portents of unsupposed reanimation from lettristic alloys:

rec
tangle
ova
l
sp
here

squ
are

In "Beam 24" a six-line block of larger type repeats in adamant concreteness "earthearthearth"—which is sufficient to arrest the gaze, draw it down into the folds and recesses of "earth" where "the art" and "hearth" jostle for recognition. Rereading *ARK* in autumn in Provence, I reflected that the industry of cicadas, crickets, grasshoppers constitute the flying needles of a diagram by which the living earth is composed, denizens of a textual anatomy made lucent by *ARK*'s beams and spires and arches.

"'GO INTO THE WORDS TO EXPAND THEM' The Voices said" in received instruction (#28). The lineage behind this provocation is extensive,[3] and includes not only an array of modern poets (Marinetti, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Chicerin, Bonset, Ball, Hausmann, Huidobro, Schwitters, Desnos, Nichol, to cite a few) but a veritable heterodoxy of lettristic beguilement, from the familiar (Rabelais and Swift) to the arcane (Juan Caramuel and Francis Lodwick), encompassing along the way gematria, kabbalah, speculative linguistics, and more. These are not the accredited resources of *ARK*—Johnson operates within a more conventional lineage of modernist American poetics—but they do propose a web of filiations that are more useful than one anemically disposed to speak in terms of "post-modern" or other literary/cultural disorders. Ostensibly a homespun work of Americana—like Ives' music, Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, or James Hampton's "Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly"[4]—*ARK* is a book bristling with affinities for Europe. The doors of the Baptistery in Florence offer reciprocal schemes of miniaturization, and of course the Facteur Cheval's Palais Ideal in Hauterives is credited as a major resource and guide. Cheval, Hampton, and Rodia compose a triumvirate of amateur audacity which is misleading with respect to *ARK*, which in its idiosyncrasy shares the bricolage aptitude, but which in its fastidious prosody rivals nothing less than the most artful precedent of Pound and Zukofsky (particularly "A" 22-23). If it aspires to the condition of music—so the analogy with Palais Ideal suggests—

the words are still a kind of cement, obdurate and intractable, "intimate into the inanimate" (#50).

The riprap sensibility is truly a builder's prerogative, and if at times the semantic dimension seems opaque, there is always the reassuring tactility of a solid wall of words. There are long stretches where the words can be as intelligibly read in reverse order (which seems congruent, after all, with Johnson's insistent center-alignment of the lines on the page); in fact, as the poet notes, #47 does indeed incorporate phrases in reverse from Henry James. Such practices, sometimes fiendishly coy and recessed, do end up emphasizing the structural elasticity of *ARK*, which consistently (almost superstitiously) spurns the servility of the poem-as-semantic-trowel. There is a certain kind of work, not ever predominant but found in every art, which is not constructed to human proportions, not given to the scale of human perception. So each such work incarnates its own focal plane and tactics of attention. "If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw," Johnson says, "I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again, attempting to know nothing but a will to create, and matter at hand." While it does not "include history"—as Pound said of his *Cantos*—*ARK* does "include" biology, astronomy, crystallography, and (predominantly) *words*, an obvious scale, but not idly assumed. Rather, language in *ARK* is attained in a memorable combination of exactitude and hunch (I think of Robert Musil's phrase "precision and soul"). Discovered and extracted. Despite the divergence over the question of history, no poet after Pound (except Zukofsky, Johnson's acknowledged mentor) has taken the credo "Dichtung=condensare" more to heart, and hand, than Ronald Johnson (and I recall Robert Kelly's remark many years ago that if you turn away from the clock Creeley's "The Door" is an epic). His "style" forces agonies of compaction on the perceptual scale of the (bewildered) reader. The pace is distinct; the images are as specific and strange as those seen through a scanning electron microscope: revelations of a dense, alert, confounding world in minutiae of expression that require considerable unfolding, like the exquisite and exemplary Beam 10, a mere two lines—

daimon diamond Monad I
Adam Kadmon in the sky

—which, like Olson's "veda edda upanishad than", is a veritable *Summa* of the man's poetic Borealis.

ARK aspires to a semantic particularity which is less like English than Chinese (where monosyllables promote unencumbered musical-

ity as much as do the accentual pitches–English "musicality" being normally confined to rhythmic approximation of sonorities otherwise resistant to its varied amalgamation of tongues). Sometimes the condensation defies explication (#79):

Kindling anew line lifted of sea,
perfect in messenger
table spread ember hid vow

–the last line in particular reading like a crib from which to work up a translation of Chinese ideograms[5]–; but more often the concision encompasses a world of observation in a Netsuke apparition (#60):

exploded sod
plowed to
cornstalk plume

–or consider the exactitude of observation in "pool all a mareshiver / of lights" (#34). The enviable imagism of such moments, dispersed amidst lines resistant to any corresponding readiness of recognition, suggests not that the "images" are intermittent but that the scale of observation fluctuates, following contours of its own exactitude. To pursue a vision of "life itself / telescoped out of the recesses of essence" (#26) it is essential that the telescopy actually *include* the recesses, and its "bliss abut abyss" (#43).

ARK is a poem that dilates with the determination to write paradise–its "Eden, glossolalia of light" (#14) a "Maelstrom itself prolonged // riddled into gospel" (#95). The adamant ecstasies of *ARK* forego the "trapeze of paraphrase" (#34), and one advances through the poem in a disconcerting mixture of scrupulousness and haze, as Johnson foregoes the dogmatic rubble of late Pound (in which the glimmers are breathtaking for that reason), as well as the piety of Dante (whose religiosity is doctrinally explicit if embellished by surreptitious soundings of dissident arcana). The words are impeccably balanced, selected it seems with a goldsmith's exactitude, but often fail to converge on a recognizable focal plain. Best at this point to remind yourself of the poet's declaration, "Literally an architecture, *ARK* is fitted together with shards of language, in a kind of cement of music."

ARK's logological dimension is deceptive; words here are as grit and spackle, mosaic particle. ARK is artifact, not argument. It consistently resists the closures of syntax–resists, that is, the binge and purge cycle of proposition and conclusion–which should be suffi-

cient warning to the reader not to persist in reading for adage or message.[6] Johnson may aspire to be "Exact as Ezekiel" (#35), but as the Biblical reference implies, such exactitude eludes lazy habits of expectation—habits which *ARK*'s "Laocoön of cocoon" (#14) openly defies. In the author's note, it is not merely an incidental aside that compels his confession of deriving from "stout pioneer stock, grandson of prairie settlers come to Kansas in a covered wagon, I grew up in no concert with ideas whatsoever. . ." Nor are there ideas here. There are, instead, strata of pertinence, ineluctable contours of enigma and gratification in equal measure, in a poem content to invest its semantics in weight and mass, gravity and velocity.

But how achieve, in words, a wordless summation? The indications given in "The Foundations" favor diversity of means. In this opening—first published in 1981 in an impeccable edition by North Point—the thirty-three sections are called Beams, an architectural reference substantiating the Spires of the second part and the Arches of the third. Until the present edition I had savored the ambiguity of beams as cross-timbers and as beams of light—an ambiguity that heightened my pleasure in the sensory manifold with which Beams 1-33 substantiated "foundation." Some eight of these initial beams are predominantly prose, giving a welcome antithetical sensibility to the architectonic cross-weave; there are visual illustrations (a Priapus in #16, a sequence illustrating cell division in #25, and a full handprint, serving as the entire text of #18); and the overall design makes handsome use of variable spacing, proportionate leading and kerning, bold caps and judicious variation of point size. *Ark*, *The Foundations* was one of the most thoughtfully and beautifully prepared typographic editions of poetry since Mallarmé's "Coup de Dés"—and, like that predecessor, conceived as such, not merely embellished in production. The fastidious design appears to have been an intention specific to the first book, however. "The Spires" (#34-66) incorporate little typographic variation, and "The Ramparts" (#67-99) none at all (although, in this case, the conservative design accentuates the consistency of compositional unit: each Arch—which is what the Ramparts are individually called—consists of eighteen three-lined stanzas). The unity (one might at times be tempted to say monotony) of "The Ramparts" is conspicuously antithetical to the buoyant inventiveness and variety of "The Foundations," and thus enhances the sense of overall design. The discrepancy, for me, lies with the middle "Spires," which fails to mediate between such explicit contraries, meandering instead along their own winsome way, less concerned about structural integrity and more, I fear, like a collection of bagatelles. It is a damaging charge, of course, to say of a book insistent on

its architectural plan that it increasingly voids its own foundations, and ends up offering words and more words in place of the word-transforming visual and concrete cornucopia of "The Foundations." So I retract the charge, mindful of my own culpability. Not that I know how to proceed to rectify the bewilderment I repeatedly feel in attempting to read some of those Spires and Arches that fail to gratify or inform my sense of overall design (which is not at all to deny the bewitchment of prosody and vision attending my reading of them). But the author's studious preparation of the text, and instructively concise note at the end of the book, suggest that these limits of insight and orientation are mine not his. *ARK*'s apparent discrepancy of end and means is one which this reader hopes someday to be cured.

Meanwhile, the poem surveys my quibbles with an instructive haughtiness and undeniable grandeur, a reminder (notwithstanding Johnson's reversal in Beam 14, cited above) of Beardsley's dictum and Pound's solace, "Beauty is difficult." In light of the astonishing lucidity of condensation everywhere evident in *ARK*, I should have the grace to let the poet have the last word; and how not assent to the thrill with which *ARK*'s "pinwheel unzip the deeps" (#72)? "From the ape at my shoulder blade I see angels. Our embryo dreamt the fishes' sleep, became a ripple, leapfrogged itself, and later a mammal: perception is a slingshot drawn back to first plasm" (#12).

—JED RASULA

Notes

1 "For Earths, grow thick as / Berries, in my native town," Dickinson writes. "My Basket holds—just—Firmaments—/ Those—dangle easy—on my arm, / But smaller bundles—Cram" (#352). In "Democratic Vistas" Whitman argues the need for "a new Literature, perhaps a new Metaphysics, certainly a new Poetry," indicating that he does not mean "the smooth walks, trimmed hedges, posys and nightingales of the English poets, but the whole orb, with its geological history, the cosmos, carrying fire and snow, that rolls through the illimitable areas, light as a feather, though weighing billions of tons."

2 In addition to Johnson, I think of the obvious example and acknowledgment of Clayton Eshleman, but also of Jackson Mac Low, who usefully chastened me long ago at my professed disdain for—and worse, avowed ignorance of—the author of "The Bridge."

3 A considerable portfolio will shortly be available in Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery, eds., *Imagining Language* (MIT Press, 1997).

4 Ives, Rodia, and Hampton are Johnson's references. One could also cite Tyree Guyton's "Heidelberg Project" in Detroit, on which see Clayton Eshleman's "Guyton Place" in *Under World Arrest*, as well as the "Concrete Garden of Eden" in Salina, Kansas—to mention one closer to the poet's home. There is now a tribe of poets who register in the evidence of their personal enigmas a place called Kansas: simply to cite Ken Irby, Michael McClure, Ronald Johnson, and Ed Sanders is to render "Kansas" a realm of incommensurable enchantments; but quite apart

from this. Johnson somehow makes Kansas appear inconceivable, which is to say miraculous. "Kansas Aweigh" (#65)!

5 Johnson's poems are ideograms without the perspectively moral fetishism of Pound, but also without the substantiating guidance of mythic leitmotif. *ARK* rehearses a certain Orphism, but only as a pastel grace-note reinforcing a posture of descent.

6 *ARK* could be taken as a thoroughly unapologetic example of language poetry. That would be a mistake, but it would highlight the divergent provocations of Zukofsky. Still, *ARK* may be a work that makes the most impacted zones of language poetry seem paragons of plain statement.

Introduction to Gary Snyder's reading from *Mountains And Rivers Without End* at the University of Michigan, Nov. 16, 1996.

Since 1956, when he read his poems about the Native American trickster Coyote at a reading in San Francisco during which Allen Ginsberg read Part One of *Howl*, Gary Snyder has been developing a selfless, sensual, landscape-attuned poetry of change and becoming, that in the light of our current awareness of planetary potential and doom, has become a clearing in American consciousness. It presents itself as ruggedly and thoroughly as monumental Chinese Sung Dynasty landscape painting in a context of interconnectedness involving lore, research, meditation, and a range of living and mythical companions. In "the cold companionable streams" of Snyder's poetry, there is a deep faith in the capacity of the earth to injure and to restore.

Mountains And Rivers Without End is Snyder's 16th book, 138 pages of text, 39 poems in 4 sections or movements.

This work was struck, some 40 years ago, off a Sung Dynasty scroll painting. Snyder's opening poem, the key to the book, describes the painting as, scene by scene, it unfurls to the left. He comments: "at the end of the painting the scroll continues with seals and poems. It tells a further tale." *Mountains And Rivers Without End*, then, is the 20th century addition to the painting. In its own interlocking, unfolding segments, it draws upon ecological awareness and nature's architecture to such an extent that I want to coin a term for what is happening,

to suggest that *Mountains And Rivers Without End* is an *ecotecture,* a habitat-structure. It redirects Whitman's "adhesive love" from solely human comradeship to a comradely display that includes Artemisia and white mountain sheep. Thus I feel that this work is not really an epic, as the dust jacket states, in the tradition of Pound and Williams. Snyder himself thinks of it as a sort of sutra. A string of kayaks comes to mind. Functionally-speaking, this book is a rock with centrifugal eddies that can be set at the center of Snyder's life work.

What appears to be the leanness in the work is actually Snyder's precise observation which obviates explanation. At its most intense, his observational power evokes prayer and praise.

Snyder adheres to the Buddhistic principle of emptiness; there is no self, everything we see and are is empty. Thus the absence of the sensitive or tormented psychological subject in this poetry.

In the spirit of Sung landscape painting, as well as in the later Cézanne, one thing is as important as another, each part is as important as the whole. Thus the nodes of illumination strung throughout the writing. Snyder's world is redolent with common wealth—his elixir of enlightenment is buttermilk.

Finally, all is metaphoric, or let's say any truth is in the synapse between the parts of a metaphor. For example: two kilograms soybeans equals a boxwood geisha comb. 4000 years of writing equals the life of a bristlecone pine. Our love is mixed with rocks and streams.

To overturn 2000 years of Christian dominion over "unchristian" nature—"over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth," including women and human slaves—the scale of values has to be massively rebalanced. *Mountains And Rivers Without End* is the first major Western poem to sweepingly foreground the natural world from a Buddhist perspective and, without cynicism, to present civilization on a sharply diminished scale.

Or as Furong Daokai, quoted by Dōgen, puts it:

> "The green mountains are always walking;
> a stone woman gives birth to a child at night."

—CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

"The River-Merchants' Wife": after 80 years an update.
***The Selected Poems of Li Po*, translated by David Hinton (New York: ND, 1996)**

Hinton's introduction pinpoints significative basics of Li's background: spontaneity, *(Wu-wei)*, debt to T'ao Ch'ien, cosmologies; friendship with Tu Fu. As a central Asian (not Chinese at all), he killed "bad" people to protect the innocent. A Taoist recluse as well as brash boaster, after the loss of wife and son he began a life of wandering. The impact of An Lu-shan's takeover of Ch'ang-an and of the 36 million people lost during the uprising went into his poetry; he spent his last 8 years wandering as a sick refugee. Of the several thousands of his poems, 1100 are all that remain (the authenticity of some are still questioned). He died in 762, drunk, in a boat reaching out to embrace the moon.

Hinton's generally clear treatment throughout his book varies from close to very loose interpretations of Li, as in "Going to visit Tai T'ien Mountain's Master" (p. 3), "A stream/ hangs in flight beneath emerald peaks" (he uses *fei*-fly to birdlike advantage. Or, "Drinking alone beneath the moon" (p. 43), that so took E.A. Robinson's fancy in "Mr. Flood's Party").

But the most accurate and judicious estimate of his book may perhaps be rendered by comparing and contrasting his work on "Ch'ang-Kan Village Song" (p. 12), with Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife" *(Persona,* 130), esteemed by many as the cynosure of his translations.

Hinton's version, (with his helpful corrections of Pound's version) usually closer to the text than Pound's, is idiosyncratic, but has not the same idiosyncrasies as Pound's. In reading the two versions I feel that each has something worthwhile to disclose about Li. Having said that, one further question rises about style: is the generally laid-back treatment of Li here, Hinton's own, or is Hinton simply transcribing (not just the verbal enervation of our age–*ruentis imperi*–in just 80 years, but) what he feels is the more realistic picture of this village girl?

How each writer deals with the subject, the girl, at once highlights the difference between the two versions. In Hinton's, we see what we assume a fairly generalized portrait of the life of an ordinary village girl in rural T'ang China, from a rather puritan, meager childhood, to a "timid and betrayed," as well as unsmiling, "downcast," and shadowy courtship and marriage. She is unceremoniously separated from her husband, "heart-stricken" over her old age, and can hardly trouble

herself to see her husband again. In short, the rather unembroidered facts.

On the other hand, what comes across with great clarity from Pound's first line onwards, is something about the way this girl, in spite of an exceedingly limited rural setting, shows her true stuff, which radiates from childhood, to courtship, marriage, to likely entry into widowhood—Pound keeps squarely before us the unfolding action of her character (As Alexander's biology teacher said, "the action is all").

For a few contrasty examples, Pound is always going toward the more definite, the more concrete, as though she were *someone he knew personally*, and where apt, transitive and active verbs that do something—yet it must be said that Hinton's version is almost always textually correct. For example, from the first line, "While my hair was cut straight across my forehead," or in the little distinguishing marks, "about the front gate," or "pulling flowers," whereas a certain lassitude is felt in Hinton's, as in "These bangs not yet reaching my eyes" (not timelessness, but *carelessness* of time in the participle, as though the girl did not exist in time).

In Pound's, she declares her will, "I stopped scowling," but in Hinton's, the scowling is intransitively softened. In Pound's, she speaks with Cleopatra's defiance of her mortal genes, "I desired my dust to be mingled with yours"; in Hinton's, a vague purpose becomes somewhat obscured: "I wanted us to be mingled as dust and ash" (which ignores the resonance of Pound's metaphor).

As against Pound's remarkable *basso ostinato* "forever and forever and forever," is Hinton's (with more correct textual justification, yet) with a trendy ambiguity, "and you always stood fast here for me." Pound's heartfelt assurance of young love, "Why should I climb the look out," in Hinton's becomes almost cynical, "no tower vigils awaiting your return."

Where Pound captures the combination of her pride in her brave soldier-husband conjoint with her restrained despair that like as not this would be the last of him (Pound lets the action speak): "You dragged your feet when you went out"; Hinton saps the strength with an intransitive verb, "where you lingered long."

But Hinton does an excellent job on "moss buried your tracks one by one" where EP makes his one slip in the poem (if we overlook his butterflies changing color seasonally!), by going AWAY from the girl! *(Cherchez la femme!)* into "the different mosses." In her loneliness she has accepted his absence, become more mature ("different")—but we're already acquainted with this girl (since childhood) and know

she would not say a thing like that! Because it abandons the subject; instead of intensifying, it drains the emotion.

And Hinton has done needed yeoman service in correcting Pound's extravagantly silly notions about the Gorges on the Kiang. The shortest gorge, five miles long has great thick sandstone towers which rise straight up 2000 feet. One might add that it is the deepest river in the world, plunging through the gorges with depths of 600 feet, and currents of 10 knots or more—"swirling eddies" all right. That "Ch'ü-t'ang Gorge in Szechwan, and Ch'ang-feng Sands, in Anhwei (of *la nostalgie* for Lu Yu) are real places adds valuable solidity to this timeless poem (memorable San-Pa [textual], also in Szechwan, is at least implied in "all those gorges").

In conclusion, how does Hinton fare in comparison with Pound? Audacity? No small thing after more than 80 years to challenge the century's foremost inventor of Chinese poetry on his home ground. But Hinton has done his basics, has already, and can still learn more from Pound about this great art.

Psychology is ineluctably a basic constituent of this poem's workings. Hinton's handling of the development of the girl has not the great depth or finesse of Pound's; Hinton's girl seems younger, less sensitive, less serene, but on the other hand, she seems far more realistically aware of village life in T'ang China than she does in Pound's Edwardian view. Pound's girl, older, wiser, instinct with sensibility—remains in a feudal court (as intuited from a 1915 London ambiance); Hinton's, more dramatic; Pound's, more lyrical.

Measured against the century's greatest (and here Pound is at his best) Hinton holds his own, is his own translator, does not dissolve into preciosity. But it seems out of the question to expect any younger poet to attain Pound's control over all the components of prosody—while keeping the toughest psychological grip on reality.

Pound apparently builds a portrait of the poems' protagonist primarily through various of his borrowings from Greek metric. Far more subtle than Wagnerian *leit motif*—Pound uses some recognizable metrical and emotional unit (e.g., /–//) as a fitting cadence describing an action (physical, ethical), e.g., "playing with blue plums . . .village of Chokan. . .married My Lord you. . .yellow with August, etc." He then repeats these metrical units to form a prosodical basis for the emotional continuity of the protagonist.

It is no small accomplishment that a translator make us see nuances, shadings in earlier translations. Hinton's does not replace Pound's translation, but Hinton's is useful in showing where Pound (lacking Chinese) went astray, and in offering a contrasting version. As Pound constantly exhorted: he wanted his work corrected. But

beyond each translator's utterance, there is a cultural sea-change that is manifest in comparing these two translations.

The Chief contrast between the two is the tremendous coherence of structure Pound has made by means of his greater technical mastery. Of almost equal significance is Pound's genius in finding something to translate his poem *into*. Here the reader cannot escape feeling the far background presence of war-sundered lovers (e.g., Hector and Andromache) as a modus operandi for enduring the Tartar rumblings on T'ang's Szechwan borders, and, *malgré tout*, for the greasy trenches of the war that took Gaudier-Brzeska).

More to the point, I think because Pound has been able to convince the reader that his protagonist feels a sense of destiny, Pound has tapped the vein of permanence. Examined carefully, the young woman in Pound's poem achieves (in her childlike gravity) with a quiet ethos of courage a heroic stature. In Hinton's poem, she does not. (Gaudier said his soldiers were ready to face German bayonets after he read them from *Cathay*). But we need Hinton's translation in order to help understand Pound's.

Here is an example of the difference between the two versions:

"At fourteen I married My Lord you."

十 *shih2.5* ten;

四 *szu4* four;

爲 *wei4* to be;

君 *chün1* sovereign;

婦 *fu4* wife;

(ten four be sovereign wife)

Here Pound, discovers her *humeur aimable* in her meeting with the boy next-door (*lang2*, "young gentleman. . .term of respect"). Playfulness mixed with respect so inflects her memory of his earnestness in "playing horse," that with childlike dignity (in a ritual which makes one with their earlier playing at life), she now addresses him (as Pound fuses boyhood's *lang2*, "gentleman" now with *chün1*, "sovereign" [which textually belongs with "wife"]) in a sweet flash of wit, "My Lord you." (Pound said of Logopoeia, "you can *not* translate it locally, but having determined the original author's state of mind, you

may or may not be able to find a derivative or an equivalent." *How To Read*, 1929). Rarely has anyone created a more evocative example. Hinton's "quite correct," but clerical parlance simply slides over it: "at fourteen, when I became your wife."

—DAVID GORDON

Potential Topography + Keys, Frames & Passages

● Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Edited by Trevor Winkfield, Introduction by John Ashbery, Translated by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Harry Mathews and Trevor Winkfield (Boston: Exact Change, 1995), 264 pp.

By way of rhyming word-pairs, homonyms, associative riddles and equal doses of other phonic combinations, double-entendres or "images from the distortion of some random text," Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) fashioned a method for composing the novels, plays and extended poems whose scope is revealed here in a representative and much-appreciated sampling of the writer's distinct peculiarities. Roussel's posthumously-published *"Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres"* outlines a unique lifelong praxis of composition, carried out with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem—albeit treading that fine line between genius and neuropathy—and whose unusual results, to say the least, lend new meaning to our notions of development and intention:

> Taking the word *palmier* I decided to consider it in two senses: as a *pastry* and as a *tree*. Considering it as a *pastry*, I searched for another word, itself having two meanings which could be linked to it by the preposition *à*; thus I obtained (and it was, I repeat, a long and arduous task) *palmier* (a kind of pastry) *à restauration* (restaurant which serves pastries); the other part gave me *palmier*

> (palm tree) *à restauration* (restoration of a dynasty). Which [in *Impressions of Africa*] yielded the palm tree in Trophies Square commemorating the restoration of the Talou dynasty.

Literary darling of the surrealists, well-to-do gentleman jack-a-dandy, trained pianist, self-styled impersonator and worldwide traveler (though one who rarely left his hotel room), not to mention eventual addict and suicide, Roussel is one of those arresting personalities who managed to coin an outlandish, albeit systematic imagination from a wealth of irresistible loopiness. It is this aspect that Winkfield and Ashbery clearly relish, and their delight is contagious—even if they tend to overlook the wretchedness of the little that is known of his final years. But Roussel is a hero after all, and so the respective notes and "a(n)ecd(otes)" by his faithful devotees throughout this collection are giddy asides to a makeshift biography. [Winkfield: "As he approached middle age Roussel became obsessed with the fear that his hair might be turning white and so, on quack's orders, sat under a hair dryer twice a week until the heat almost scorched his scalp. When he arrived in Persia and found no electricity, he resorted to wearing hot casserole dishes on his head. . ."]

In a prose that is progressively a cross between the murmurings of dream-reality and the shrills of narrative machinery on the brink, Rousselian characters exist as if only to sustain a story that may either evaporate into others, lie momentarily abandoned, or come grinding altogether to a halt. ["Soon afterward Romé was struck dead by a crazed avenger who had been deprived of his lover by Romé's preaching, which had converted her."]Thus incest and sudden death, natural disasters, matrimony and long-lost inheritances can all be contained and exhausted within a couple of pages penned by Roussel.

According to Michel Leiris, Roussel not only exploited the creative power of words; his writing was "a magic nominalism such that the word originates the thing, and the dislocation. . . of any series of phrases provokes the recreation of the universe, the construction of a special world that replaces the common world." (Indeed, it is in more than just this sense that Roussel's "Documents to Serve as an Outline" can be read in tandem with Leiris' own *Nights as Day, Days as Night.)*

Alternately dubbed "the greatest hypnotist of modern times" (by Breton); "president of the republic of dreams" (by Aragon), and a "genius in the pure state. . . . the Proust of dreams" (by Cocteau); the writer he may well most resemble would have been one imagined by

a flakier yet equally labyrinthine Borges. A seemingly centerless and polymorphous authorship overflowing with references to existent and nonexistent realms of the imagination, or books within books, Roussel's writing aimed to build up from the sheer marvel of beholding the coincidence of like things—between, say, the meaning of *billard* [billiard table] and the resonance of *pillard* [plunderer]. Uncharted worlds emerge from that gaping chasm, spun in an *ars combinatoria* animated by the perpetual spirit of potentiality. . . "a section of a starry sky viewed from sidereal space to create an impression of infinity." ["Instructions for 59 Drawings"]

● Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Paul Fournel, Claude Berge, Jacques Jouet & Harry Mathews, *Oulipo Laboratory,* Texts from the Bibliothèque Oulipiènne translated by Harry Mathews and Ian White (London: Atlas Press, Atlas Anti-Classic), 1995.

For more than twelve years Atlas Press has been devoted to publishing the essential works and documents of the avant-garde "anti-tradition," including early gems such as Alfred Jarry's *Messalina* ("One of the most peculiar contributions ever made to the dreary genre of historical fiction," *The Guardian*), surrealist classics such as Benjamin Peret's *Death to the Pigs* and George Bataille's *Encyclopædia Acephalica*—an impressive enterprise that should be wholeheartedly applauded.

Oulipo Laboratory gathers a handful of shorter works to have emerged from the mind of this ersatz writer's collective. It also features the two manifestos written by François Le Lionnais, co-founder—with novelist and poet Raymond Queneau—of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* in the early 1960s. (A larger *Oulipo Compendium* is scheduled from Atlas, including examples of oulipian methods used by American authors Gilbert Sorrentino, Dallas Weibe and Keith Waldrop.)

Originated as an experiment incorporating "mathematical structures into the process of literary creation," the writers associated with Oulipo soon ventured beyond mathematics "to include all forms of artificial restrictions in literature" [Brotchie, *ix*], exploiting constraint as a means by which to liberate language and as a devise by which to build what may be known of the imagination. To cite Le Lionnais himself, "The creative effort of these works is principally brought to bear on the formal aspects of literature: alphabetical, consonantal, vocalic, syllabic, phonetic, graphic, prosodic, rhymic, rhythmic, and numerical constraints, structures, or programmes." Or elsewhere: "The efficacy of a structure—that is, the extent to which it helps a

writer—depends primarily on the degree of difficulty imposed by rules that are more or less constraining."

Though a few of the pieces inevitably smack of mandarin *divertissements* or sophomoric leisure sport ("The Great-Ape Love-Song" by Jacques Jouet), at its best, oulipian writing is the literary equivalent of recreational problem-solving, as in Claude Berge's "Who Killed the Duke of Densmore," a prismatic take on the whodunit, or Queneau's linguistic geometry—in "The Foundations of Literature (after David Hilbert)"—wherein the terms "point," "straight line," and "plane" are replaced by "word," "sentence" and "paragraph." By far the most provocative in concept and execution, and in keeping with the Rousselian inspiration of the Oulipo, is Italo Calvino's "How I Wrote One of My Books," a chapter by chapter structural and thematic diagram of his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*:

> The reader who is there (L) is reading the book that is there *(l)*
> The book that is there relates the story of the reader who is in the book (L')
> The reader who is in the book does not succeed in reading the book in the book *(l')*
> The book that is there does not relate the story of the reader who is there
>
> [. . .]

Taking issue with what Le Lionnais termed "eructive" literature—that is, with the romantic-modernist myth of uncontested genius, abstract inspiration, the artist as medium and the work as spiritual or moral container—the Oulipo and its offspring succeed in calling art into question as a series of codes to be strategically employed, hence underscoring the formal restrictions that have always determined an important, if often invisible aspect in the production of meaning.

● Daniel Spoerri, An Anecdoted Topography of Chance, in collaboration with Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, Dieter Roth, Roland Topor (London: Atlas Press, Atlas Arkhive Four, 1995). 239 pp.

Historically and geographically coincident with the Oulipo, yet of a slightly different order—that is, away from the mathematics of creation toward the laboratory of the everyday—*An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* was begun by Spoerri in Paris circa 1960. Following suit of his

"new-realist" snare-paintings (assemblages constructed using the actual debris of his breakfast/work table), Spoerri decided, with fastidious resolve, to begin a catalogue of the objects left "at random" there. ["**1. Piece of white bread** with a bite out of it, sliced from a loaf bought yesterday (Oct. 16, 1961);" "**34L. Dark blue plastic stopper** from a bottle of wine. . ."etc.]

Recalling the story of how each object got there, where it was purchased and what associations it provokes—articulating the voiceless narrative of the objects with which we surround ourselves, and those by which we are surrounded—the entries are scattered with superscript letters designating additional footnote commentary, and sub-commentary to the commentaries, made over the years in successive editions, including this one, by Spoerri's translators into English and German, Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth. Thus a typical entry—almost chosen at random?—might read:

> **44. Very pretty dark blue** bottle with a large neck, bought in a shop opposite the Galerie Raymond Cordier, Rue Guénégaud, one day when for no apparent reason I visited the gallery; said bottle is topped by a socket and bulb, the whole forming a bedside lamp.[a]
>
> a. And not just *forming*[b] a bedside lamp. (DR ,1968)
>
> b. We all know that form follows function. (EW, 1995)

In this, Spoerri's *Topography* anticipated and was later parallel to the Fluxus movement which above all sought to narrow (if not ultimately abolish) the gap between life and art—and as such, it can also be read as the portrait of a time-period and as the testimony to a workaday friendship in art. At its most profound, the *Topography* seems to answer to symptoms that Henri Lefebvre was concurrent in identifying at the time, as if in response to certain forms of modernity that were causing everyday life "to degenerate into 'the everyday,'" so that, in Spoerri's own words, "objective life organized by chance [becomes] the surest means of obtaining a true-to-life picture."

What rises from all the tangents and sub-tangents, from the painstakingly detailed description and trivia, personal information and gossip, the interjections and afterthoughts, the postscripts and erasures, is the world in all its inescapable and sometimes glorious banality, as if also to exult in the bogus pretense of ever rendering

possible any sort of "realism." As if to say, in the repeated meanwhiles, and again with Lefebvre, that: "Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human—and every human being—a whole, takes its shape and form."

● Clark Coolidge, *Keys to the Caverns* (Gran Canaria: Zasterle Press, 1995), 51 pp.

With the assurance of his line as he allows it to dive and hover, riding the possibility of structure and the matter at hand, Clark Coolidge performs his cool with sheer Rilkean control and artlessness in the "loops and links that do not lead to plots," tongued also with erotic trills, Elizabethan licks, elisions, nods to artists and musicians, and a fine-tuned sense of humor ["The shiniest communist allows the vanilla squad"]. I suspect a great deal of Coolidge's work is dream-inspired, but until now none has so obviously pointed to the landscape of night vision as *Keys to the Caverns*. (The repeated allusions to pen-and-ink suggest the work was actually drawn from a handwritten logbook.)

This 135-section prose-work serves as a compass to dreamscape, beginning in fits and starts of short one-line entries ("Are we left by another road?") to longer, more fluid sections:

> With a good glass from the lamp room one can discern an opening large enough for a single man's body to be woven through the engines of escarpment into the pages of romance.

Indeed the first third of the poem abounds in references to glass, lamps, engines and bricks as if to convoke the generative factory of sleep. Many of the sections can be read as symbolic source-work, travel logs or the attempt to access a sense of beginning: "A calm plan touching base with forbidden entrance. Over there is something once happened now closed. Some things once come upon are soon left behind." Others build on the trope of enclosure wherein meaningful events take place or establish a "forbidden practice." In the process, the incremental pieces also constitute an investigation into the material nature of prose and of its less-expository double. Coolidge's vocabulary turns tellurian and mineral three-fourths of the way into

the work, as if to inaugurate a descent, by way of allusions to carbon, agates, the color orange and earthquake—a veritable journey to the center of the earth:

> What is the temperature of the earth? Nothing will be described particularly, just the array of the hand that is dealt you. One episode after another, stackable as walls. After a while you begin to catch glimpses of the course by which you came.

An array of underground ambits are encountered along the way, including "the symmetrical cavern of television" "a sort of mountain within the size of the mountain" and "where all the snow was enclosed in wood" to arrive at the book's entirely tentative conclusion: "We have kept absolutely everything. That is the limit, shouldering the whole mountain in a hole at hand, and difference."

● Susan Howe, *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* (New York: New Directions, 1996) 122 pp.

Frame Structures contains four books, long out-of-print, published by Susan Howe in the mid- to late-1970s, a succession that hailed a veritable eruption and onslaught of writerly power—*Hinge Picture* (1974), *Chanting at the Crystal Sea* (1975), *Cabbage Gardens* (1979) and *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978). Revisited now by way of new versions made available in a single volume, "Frame Structures" is also the name of the opening poem-cum-historical-essay, written as the edge to frame the earlier work—or, as Howe herself affirms, to underscore the notion of "preface as afterimage."

Set in Buffalo, "Frame Structures," makes an initial gesture to the figure of a departing or absent father as if to rhyme with the later statement that "Historical imagination gathers in the missing"—a figure also, among others, who points to an advanced aesthetic "in favor of disobedience." Tracing the flow of capital from the Netherlands to these States by the Holland Land Company; following one of the latter's employees and the future "father of Buffalo," Joseph Ellicott; depicting the history of a particular place, first the rise of Western New York State, then 6 Craigie Circle, Boston, and the intellectual vectors that intersect therein, including the figure of a forgotten Longfellow, and rendering the (coincidental?) likeness of Nigeria and Niagara as colonial place-names, these and other dense clusters move back and forth over time in an attempt to render the writerly equivalent of

behaviorist (Skinner) or linguistic (Jackobson) "deep structures" in order to posit space as "a frame we map ourselves in."

"Frame Structures" constitutes the autobiographical and historical resonance "between the lines" of the poetry to follow, and indeed it sums up many of the concerns in Howe's total body of work to date: the notion of place as verbal nimbus and nominalist stage where a difference is performed between encyclopedias of knowledge and the records of mistake; thus documents are pieced together to raise an architecture of personal memory and collective historic "fact" between the flux of migrations and prodigal returns, between general acts and the specificity of meaning. Over and over again, however:

> The brute force is Buffalo because of its position as a way station whose primary function is the movement of goods from east to west and vice versa in dark reaches before soldiers come foraging. Close by lies a great approaching Modernism my early poems project aggression.

Employing the gravity of Biblical reference and delivery, in lines severed or enjambed so as to leave dangling consonants in mid-breathe or by way of word-wrapped columns, "Hinge Picture" renders the tensions between mind and body, between writing and the invisible, between the imagination that separates men and women, barbarity and civilizations, the stations of society and family as per the kingdom. In like manner, "Chanting at the Crystal Sea" follows a dream-logic narrative articulated in the declarative phrasing of H.D., on the subject of women, frontier and survival. Set in a winter landscape as imagined by the Brothers Grimm, the poem is loosely shaped with allusions to war and truce, to vast oblong spaces and the lone figures they contain, as well as to the links between forebear and offspring. It is a territory where the self and its surrogate may collide in the half light of failed paternity, to form—as in, specifically, "The Secret History of the Dividing Line" but more generally in much of Howe's astonishing corpus—the intellectual wilderness that is a story run aground in New England.

> sh dispel iris sh snow sward wide ha
> forest I a boundary manic a land sh
> whit thin : target cadence marked on
> O about both or don't indication Americ
> sh woof subdued toward foliage free sh

● Michael Palmer, *At Passages* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 101 pp.

At Passages joins Coolidge's *Keys to the Caverns* and Susan Howe's *Frame Structures* as an important new collection by another of our major mid-career poets. In the manner of his series "Notes for Echo Lake," Michael Palmer has fashioned a kind of *cahier*-meditation on lyric utterance itself and on the narrative qualities intrinsic to the seemingly lifeless relationship among objects, as the poems also address the hollow dividing nature from the self as mediator between consciousness and a formed world, or the colossal difference between the glow of names—like "hyssop, marjoram, orange mint," for instance—and the atrocities to which language can do no justice ("Write this. We have burned all the villages").

Palmer writes with a near-Proustian elegance in his blend of the interrogatory and declarative, matching the silences and mummery of Beckett with the logic of Wittgenstein to explore the limits of song and the generative sentence in the face of worlds deemed set and self-evident. Here, his dense and haunting "Letters to Zanzotto" are issued from the desolate expanses of history and language, employing an epistolary mode devoid of stable sender or recipient, over the possible landscape of an apocalypse or over the hell-mouth opening to the errors of the *siècle*, bringing to full foreground the estrangement of experience by the powers of naming.

In "Six Hermetic Songs," Palmer renders the tension between dependence of mind and autonomy of the imagination as manifest in childhood fancy ["You can bring down a house with a sound. / Not to understand this. But we builded it."]. At his most extreme ("Cites"), Palmer establishes the intricate twistings and chopped parlance of a persevering voice plummeting downward, inside out, taking compression to bursting point.

Highly political in a late modern sense which foregrounds the use of language and image as they are transmitted and received via the mass media, Palmer's "Seven Poems Within a Matrix for War" engages an eliding of "desert" and "storm" to address, in part, the representational complexities surrounding the Gulf War. These poems are powerful precisely because they speak of an incompetence intrinsic to the medium while in their own way exploring the unattainability of the political sphere and the fiction of the "citizen" in the modern State:

> And the name once again to be the old one

Saint Something, Saint Gesture, Saint Entirely the Same
as if nothing or no one had been nameless in the interim
or as if *still* could be placed beside *storm*

that simply, as in a poem
Have you heard the angels with sexed tongues,
met the blind boy who could see with his skin,

his body curled inward like a phrase,
like an after in stillness or a letter erased
Have you seen what's written on him

as question to an answer or calendar out of phase
Add up the number of such days
Add *illness* and *lilt* as formed on the tongue

Add that scene identical with its negative,
that sentence which refuses to speak,
present which cannot be found

—ROBERTO TEJADA

Revelry To Revery: A Review Of Karen Mac Cormack, *Marine Snow* (Ecw Press, Toronto 1995)

Marine Snow, Karen Mac Cormack's latest volume of poems, is her most accomplished collection to date. Concerns as well as techniques that have been evident in her previous books, resurface and find an even finer & a more varied, or modulated, expression here. This does not make them "clearer" in any obvious sense: though leavened with humor, wit & tenderness, her poems remain tough crystalline structures—the title "Marine Snow" foreshadows these crystals— difficult work for an impatient reader looking for some instantly consumable "meaning." In fact, one of the characteristic movements of the poems

is exactly the constant care to defer such instant gratification, or to displace it from some Poundian level of "logopoeia" (or thought that can be "grasped" in one fell swoop, as the "logos" is & will always be, by its nature, unitarian) to one of "seme-poeia"—a making of "semes," pre- & post-semantic signs & cyphers & seeds, cross-pollinating in a movement that makes meaning unstable, changing, nomadic. "As normal goes nomad," she writes in the poem "Export Notwithstanding," pointing to, among other things, what happens to meaning when words are set in motion, made to cross the boundaries of their familiar contexts, in both our world (the usual shared associations assuming words as pure signifiers of an absent signified) and theirs (the words in their own contexts, i.e. language and its structures, syntactic and grammatical.)

Which does not exclude EP's other terms, "melopoeia" or "phanopoeia": it merely moves these too to other levels so that, for instance, the music of the poem can no longer be based on "melos," those familiar melodic structures, that have in Western culture always associated poetry with songlike mimesis, based on repetition & minor variations within sameness. And "phanos," image, can no longer be an aesthetic resting place, a "resolution" where the imagination metaphors the disquiet differences that gave rise to the act of writing into a unified concretion sublating all prior tensions. That classical & thus classifying impulse to simplify & hierarchize is continually & consciously fought & resisted—even, & maybe most powerfully there where the poem tends toward aphoristic statement. A resistance worked by displacement into heterogenous assemblages of deterritorialized images, (re)turning the "phanos" on/to itself by, so to say, backlighting the verbal *materia* that otherwise so easily gets lost in the shuffle of image-making. Via these concerns, Mac Cormack inscribes herself clearly within the line of contemporary experimental work such as that of the Language poets (among others), though her moves, the delicacy of her placings & humor are *sui generis*; as Marjorie Perloff notes in her back-cover tribute, Mac Cormack's "exquisite poise, the integrity of her poetic line, her command of verbal nuance, pun, and paragram" are matchless.

The 45 poems that make up the book show a return to more mixed forms than the two previous books (*Quill Driver* and *Quirks & Quillets*) which used prose-poem formats exclusively. In *Marine Snow*, there is a careful orchestration of three basic forms, interleaved throughout the book: First, her now familiar prose-poem forms, with the stanzaic paragraph as formal unit (i.e. often there is no punctuation except for the white space between/around these stanzas, or a final period.) Then there are centered poems, a typographical device

which to me has always seemed a difficult one to carry off, *pace* McClure, but which Mac Cormack here uses deftly: most of the centered poems are built up from one-line end-stopped phrases, usually separated by double or triple spacings, and ranging from single words to complete sentences that often bring to mind Stein's moves in *Tender Buttons*. The third form is the more traditional looking left-justified poem (with one right-justified, ragged-left poem thrown in), working with & against enjambement & the more traditional line techniques of the lyric, as in the following excerpt from "Untitled," also a good example of the poet including hints at her poetic process in the work itself:

> north motions south days
> off nights on call
> heady hands-on-words
> everything smells of
> eternity if not escape
> winning without a title
> keeps the count down grafting
> not in the sense of safety net
> to take herself (so)
> seriously in case
> others don't ignore levity
> "I" was not the gift
> another language spoken
> could make sound of

The mix of forms is judicious & points to a careful composition of the volume *qua* book rather than as a mere gathering of single instances. Though the different forms make for different rhythms & reading pleasures in their orchestration, they share similar concerns. Mac Cormack works at investigating (& disrupting) language at all levels. At that of the sentence she can move from small local syntactical subversions ("The adamant if loadstone falling of fill" for example) to the stanza-length paratactical orchestration of phrases that make the act of reading participatory at exactly the syntax-making level. Here is one such stanza from the poem "Conveyance:"

> This is where I leap prior to tip of speak slowly and the depth will be less so as eyes widen it's all follow between the teeth remove thorns but if everything reinforced nothing's changed may be transferable after secretion panels succeed where walls don't surface taking in what

we don't most of all solutions according to steps taken
back place.

Another level of pleasure in disrupting the text is that of grammar. She often collapses traditional word classifications, as, to take a simple example, in the line cited above, "north motions south days," where the plural nouns "motions" and "days" easily turn into verbs. But, it seems to me, her special focus & delight is in investigating individual words themselves—"Here are the stronger shards, impassive verbs and pronouns become trophies for no such thing as bearings." This is often accomplished by means of puns ("All calamities find the name Jane for what nonfictional Alice wore to the ball." "Radar or not hear it comes." "If the ring fits answer the phone") and ostranenie-esque juxtapositions and riffs ("Revelry to revery." "Remembered as strings the words *too many times* mean this frantic deferral ablaze." "All acknowledgment undertow expels the word *dainty*.")

The book's epigraph is taken from Michel de Certeau and reads: "There will thus be facts that are no longer truths" and comes from his *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Which is also exactly where Karen Mac Cormack's art is rooted & finds its strength: a practised, i.e. sharply focused, attention brought to bear on the details of everyday life, both "the outside real & the insidereal," to quote Ed Dorn, & on the relations (or lack thereof) between those details and language, the only tool we have to make (new) sense of how we act & think, of how (much) we live in a universe in which facts are indeed not necessarily truths any longer—something due, in great part, to the careless use or willed abuse of language, an abuse it is the poet's job if not to right, then at least to address & show. A demanding art requiring (of poet & reader alike) an attentive listening both to the world around us & to the particulars of language, down to the very constituent parts of words—"If letters train a pattern too, the valleys cease in mountains"—to ride not only "the size of words," but to travel for awhile in the company of that nomadic caravan she calls "the warm slow alphabet."

—PIERRE JORIS

A selected works is like fur; it gives only a spotty indication of the animal it covers, but is essential toward attracting interest and reviving an important body of work in danger of extinction. This is especially true of poet Bob Kaufman. Despite his being a legend in San Francisco (where a street has been named after him) hailed in France as an American Rimbaud, and a seminal member of the Beat movement (Kaufman is Chuck Berman in Kerouac's novel *Desolation Angels*, "who is a colored kid from the West Indies who barged into my party six months earlier high with Cody and the gang and I had a Chet Baker record on and we hoofed at each other in the room, tremendous, the perfect grace of his dancing casual, like Joe Louis casually hoofing") Kaufman has languished in obscurity. Much of this has to do with Kaufman's indifference to fame and his commitment to a poetic as fresh and singular as jazz improvisation. Kaufman's poetry was primarily oral; it has the abrasive charm of an open air market, boisterous exchange and tossed salmon, abrupt appositions of lobster and garlic. To embed such a dynamic in a book compromises much of its energy. Nevertheless, *Cranial Guitar, Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman* (Coffee House Press, 1996) is a creditable and comprehensive tribute to Kaufman's work. It includes Kaufman's three broadsides, *Abomunist Manifesto* (1959), *Second April* (1959), and *Does the Secret Mind Whisper* (1960), all published by City Lights, selections from Bob's three published books (*The Ancient Rain, Golden Sardine* and *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*) and a generous sample of Uncollected Works, such as "Mongolian Sunset in Gobi Desert," composed in 1980 and "dropped on the floor of Curley's, an unpretentious North Beach diner, where for years Bob could be found in the early morning having breakfast." The introduction by David Henderson, who presented a four-hour program on Kaufman for KPFA in Berkeley between 1987 & 1988, is a detailed and informative condensation of a turbulent and far-reaching life. Raymond Foye's anecdote about the discovery of the manuscript for *The Ancient Rain,* published by New Directions in 1981, is vivid testimony of Kaufman's casual attitude toward publication and the peripatetic life he led: ". . .at the bottom of this pile of burnt-out wood and rubble I found this famous Moroccan leather binder which contained his poems. The poems were singed around the edges, but I carried them out and brought them over to City Light's publishing office. . .We carefully peeled these manuscript pages off, one by one. They were soaked with water from the fire hoses." "He and horn were one, world blotted out," wrote Kaufman

in "Hawk Lawler: Chorus," echoing a remark Sir Philip Sidney once made: "A poet, no industry can make, if his own *genius* be not carried into it and therefore is it an old proverb, *Orator fit; Poeta nascitur.*" I do believe Kaufman was a born poet; poetry was a way of life, a conviction vital as a gland. A comfortable separation between art and life was inconceivable. Nothing testifies to that more than the Buddhist vow of silence he took after witnessing Kennedy's assassination on TV in 1963, a vow that lasted ten years, to the end of the Vietnam war in 1973. Many of Kaufman's published poems are transcriptions of tape recordings made in coffeehouses: "derrat slegelations, flo goof baber" "on yardbird corners of parker flights to sound filled pockets in space." Kaufman cared nothing for career, but careened the alleys of a commodity-based culture with élan and sincerity. "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom; if you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn," said Charlie Parker. "I would die for poetry," said Bob Kaufman. And did.

The Titanic's rudder weighed a hundred and one tons, and her hull contained over three million rivets. It was big. The Watusi are both "a pastoral people of Rwanda and Burundi" and "a dance supposedly imitative of Watusi tribal dances," popularized in the early '60s by the hit song of the same name. Fuse these disparate identities into the title of a book and you have Connie Deanovich's *Watusi Titanic* (Timken Publishers, Inc., 1996) a gathering of nimble sestinas and verbal tarantellas, sensual and fine and dangerous. "Out she danced from the gypsy wagon," writes Deanovich in "Ballerina Criminology," "snapping a fan and a smile to generalize honesty." Bizet's Carmen leaps immediately to mind, teasing and provoking the dutiful Don José. Carmen embodies poetry—by turn tender, cruel, seductive, imperious, sensual, arch—and to "generalize honesty" is to both diffuse and dilute it. One can see the gleam in Carmen's eyes as she flaunts her voluptuous honesty at a crowd of captive soldiers: the world of reason and duty vanquished by the fire of the romantic imagination. "So were Horace his odes called *carmina,*" writes Ben Jonson, "and anciently all the oracles were called *carmina.*" Deanovich is especially adept at incorporating cinematic technique into the dynamic of her writing. Sergei Eisenstein argued that the essence of all film editing is conflict and that the most dynamic editing involves collision rather than the linkage of images. The emotional impact of a film ultimately derives from, and depends on, montage. In "Addition to Hitchcock" are splices of dissonant tense ("it was raining/ and it was going to rain") the eery simultaneity of a storm and Hitchcock's *The Birds* playing on a TV positioned symmetrically "right in front of the middle window," which transmogrifies again in space and time: "tomorrow though she

would set the TV in the middle of a table/ and have two youths from the community center/ play ping-pong on it," the little white ping-pong ball arcing "sweetly over" "Suzanne Pleshette's head in the school yard scene/ that's dipped first in so much tenderness then in so much blood." Deanovich uses disjunctive techniques to modify proportion and mood as a camera's tilts and diagonals alter imagery in film, as in "History as Bourgeois Construct" (which has the wonderful line Paul Hoover noted in his blurb, "imagination must have dirt") ". . .the opening of a pelican's eye/ is reminiscent of the eye/ of a creepy little drinking kid." We have a long shot (pelican) a close shot (the eye) and a middle class *mise en scene*, "creepy little drinking kid," his eye no doubt magnified by the bottom of the drinking glass. Laura Riding was right; poetry is far too sensual a medium for freeze-framing the bald Platonic truth. What you need is multiple exposure, superimposition, lap dissolves and a boom microphone. "Ice parsley/ Music a mood/ frantic as barn love." Olé.

Ernest Fenollosa cites five different forms of the pronoun 'I' in the Chinese language, a weak and defensive 'I,' an emphatic 'I,' a selfish and private 'I,' an egotistical 'I' (one who takes pleasure in his own speaking) and a self talking to self 'I.' The latitudinarian title of Dean Young's recent collection of poetry, *Strike Anywhere* (CLP/ Univ. Press of Colorado, 1995) evokes the mobile and pluralistic subjectivity—"floating eyeball"—favored by the New York School of poets. The influence of Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch run strong throughout. O'Hara's giddy, cocktail party garrulity, and Koch's elliptical and comic imagery are much in evidence, and not a few of the poems reveal, and revel in, O'Hara's autosubversive burlesque of lyrical subjectivism. Young's persona is tenuous and unbalanced ("maybe I'm just a figment in someone's dream") self-deprecatory and besieged ("I survived the octopus simmered in lamb's blood") mythical and protean ("I'm a broken Kore, lips barely parted") petulant and opinionated ("I hate the radio, how it pretends to be your friend"). Which is not to say this work is merely an imitative pyrite. Poems like "Errata" achieve a specific gravity. I quite like "Errata's" "plethoras of putty," its textual richness and inventive conception. But the book is an uneven field. Some of Young's drolleries struck me as being a bit forced: ". . .there is also sweetness/ in saying a name over and over again/ when you're alone and miserable in Peru./ Peru, Indiana that is." Young uses surrealist sleight of hand to leaven the ever-present climate of despair ("Part of me is still standing in the falling/ snow with my burning chicken") and deftly blends the mundane with the macabre to produce a vivid and cogent experience of pain: "The despair/ of loving may lead to long plane rides with/ little leg room,

may lead to a penis full/ of fish, a burning chicken, a room filled/ with a single pink rose." But the effect is spoiled by a bumptious afterthought: "Funny how/ we think of it as a giant rose instead/ of a tiny room." As Horace said of Homer, "he is not equally awake in every line."

Lisa Jarnot's *Some Other Kind of Mission* (Burning Deck, 1996) is not a misnomer. This is a difficult and puzzling book. It's a bit like entering Utah's Canyonlands for the first time: the landscape is at first bleak, threatening, otherworldly. But as time is spent bending down and picking up rocks and noticing the ceaseless flux of light and color the richness of the land begins to inundate the senses. It is, physically, a very attractive book; the cover design (by Lisa Jarnot) of a reproduced etching by Bruce Kurland is a compelling and eerily beautiful image. Interspersed between passages of compact prose are collages on graph paper of handwritten, blanked, patched, and typewritten text. The text proper (typeset in 10 pt. Palatino by Rosmarie Waldrop on Glatfelter acid-free paper) favors lower case letters over majuscules at the beginning of sentences, many with little spacing between them. The clusters of text seem clenched and nervous, about to implode, collapse in on themselves like a star, hydrogen atoms coalescing to form helium, adverbs coalescing to form nouns: "how in dreams are only." This visual cuing suits the materiality of the language very well. The book is structured like a narrative, with chapters and marginalia and epilogue and index, but the language is fiercely anti-mimetic and ungrammatical. What little referentiality there is suggests a kind of road trip, a stark milieu of terns, firs, a fellow named Lance and a chicken farm and a grocery store and medians and meridians and a truck. The real landscape is the text itself. "The destruction of the mimesis," observes Michael Riffaterre in *Semiotics of Poetry,* "or its obverse, the creation of the semiosis, is thus exactly coextensive with the text: it is the text." Jarnot deploys a broad range of rhetorical tropes to raise her semiotic grid to the max: repetition ("followed by followed by," "of of of") rhyme ("tweed indeed") half rhyme ("half have," "clover clever") neologism ("meticules of fallout," "the meticules of chemistry") parodic allusion ("black bird singing in the garbage dumps") nonsense ("on the shores of do not enter ample bond") solecism ("then we were whence to get paid") appropriation ("all the gifts that wise men bring") catachresis ("in the cortex of the slender walk") syllepses ("i've gone to toll booths most of the day") and puns ("turning terns," "linear indecision"). The Marginalia is quite wonderful, like leaving Canyonlands and finding a carnival in full progress in Moab. It possesses a rich Spicerian humor: "Paris fucked Helen fourteen hundred times," "As though we were outlaws and in a bath

together," and offers some telling information about the life of the author: "I'm going to buy some more cool pens." Jarnot's sensibility is extreme; this book is not for all tastes. Those who prefer a more referentially grounded epistemology to the rigors of an intertextual tundra would be wise to shun this other kind of mission. Like all difficult terrain, it invites a deal of active participation, good binoculars and a four-wheel drive.

—JOHN OLSON

***Narrative's Journey; The Fiction and Film Writing of Dorothy Richardson*, by Susan Gevirtz: Writing About Women, Feminist Literary Studies, Peter Lang, Publisher, Vol. 16, 1996**

I am excited by the method stunningly projected by Susan Gevirtz in her biography of Dorothy Richardson. I do not know if Gevirtz has used a post-structural method, or not! Her use of material widely differs from that of other biographers and presents an advanced nonconformism in the risky use of biographical material.

She has assembled an edifice which ventures into a new theory of biography. In part through her efforts in methodology her biography of Dorothy Richardson becomes a *writing of exploration*, even as her subject survives as a notable innovator of the novel of the Twentieth Century.

In every successful biography the biographer finds some point in which the subject becomes an extension of themselves, if only briefly. This

> enlargement of the scope of the field demands 'empathy,' a mysterious source. What Gevirtz and Dorothy Richardson share is an extending Modernity.

Along with James Joyce, Richardson is regarded as an initiator of the method known to us as "stream of consciousness." In *Pilgrimage*,

Richardson's title for her series of separately titled novels, Miriam Henderson is the heroine. In the beginning Miriam is placed in the London of the early 1900s. Her world is of young secretaries and dental assistants, friends, who attend free lectures and musicales, who live in chill boarding houses in the city of London. The events in the novels are to be revealed solely through the eyes of Miriam. It is only through her perspective that emotional moments rise and fall. In this way the work of Richardson resembles that of James Joyce, and the figure of Bloom who is our guide to Dublin, as Miriam is our guide to London.

Toward the end of the novel sequence that extends into the 1930s, there is a possible falling off of the story line, as the author ages and is physically removed from the setting of her youth. Yet Richardson's projection of the

> stream of consciousness, never lessens or hesitates. Her sensitive instrument, Miriam, will continue as our Virgil with a continued exposure to the hazards of enveloping time.

Gevirtz reminds us Richardson gave the title *Pilgrimmage* to her series of novels. In Chaucer's time *Pilgrims went on Pilgrimmage*. They were on a *Quest*. Gevirtz writes that Richardson's *pilgrimmage is an allegory of allegory, or writing ABOUT WRITING.* This theme of a mystical journey to fulfillment and understanding of self will be reinforced throughout the novels with consistent allusions to Dante. This Dante parallel appears in the late novel, *Interim*, when Miriam attends a Dante lecture and feels the absence of love in her being, *in her inability to feel humility in universal terms.*

Gevirtz explains that for Richardson, WRITING is a means of participating in a sense of adventure, of producing a *joy that can then be reproduced in the reader, and by the reader. It is this longing for participation* that makes the whole process necessary.

What continues to excite us in the Gevirtz biography, is not only the story of Dorothy Richardson as the exceptional Miriam, but the *METHOD* employed by Gevirtz. Our concentration on the method of Richardson will shift to her biographer *now suspended in the process* of making accountable the method of Richardson!

The idea of *selectivity of method* is strangely ignored by biographers whose choice is a linear one. In Gevirtz we witness the ingenuous, schematic, breaking of the stone of Biography. Her work is similar in effect to Richardson's "stream of consciousness" and with a shared iconoclasm.

For instance, the biographer, interested in film and seeking means for film to be useful in her writing, within the limitations of a page, includes notice of the reviews of films that Richardson wrote for the film magazine, Close-up, published in the 1920s and 1930s, evoking a cinematic stroke on her page. Notice how cleverly she makes an assemblage of the *idea* of the Silver Screen attached to writing, itself. And she does this with music, another personal concern. Note how music fills and replenishes the pages of this book, as it also did in Richardson's novels.

And most importantly I wish to point out how immediate is Gevirtz' response to Richardson's idea of writing as participation, "the orchestral spectacle of the novel-chapters working *together*."

—BARBARA GUEST

Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996); Andrei Codrescu, *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (Black Sparrow Press, 1996); Ed Sanders, *Chekov* (Black Sparrow Press, 1995).

The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai is a revised and expanded edition of the 1986 Harper & Row selection, spanning 40 years of writing from one of Israel's most important poets. This latest selection further illustrates how Amichai's work has been one of this century's most powerful commitments to exploring the central paradox of civilization: the struggle between Eros and Thanatos.

Born in Germany and emigrated to Palestine between the first and second world wars, Amichai grew up in a world where war was both local and global. He is also among the first generation conscious of the fact that we have the technology to destroy all of human civilization. Thus, when asked in an interview, "what are the central experiences in your life," Amichai responded, ". . .love and hate and how to deal with them" (33).[1]

For many poets of Amichai's generation, how to deal with love and hate within a global context has been a question of how *not* to deal. But for Amichai, who served for four years during World War II and fought in all of Israel's wars up to the Lebanon Campaign, it is not a question of dealing or not dealing with the profound conflict between Eros and Thanatos. His personal history is the history of Israel, which is, in turn, a kind of synecdoche of all social, political and religious conflict throughout history.

These poems are rigorously attentive to the immediate without being provincial, meditative without being abstract, and visionary without being mystical:

> Instead of singing Hallelujah, a curtain
> fluttering from an open window.
> Instead of saying Amen, a door or a shutter closing.
> Instead of the Vision of the End of Days
> the flapping of banners on an empty street after the
> [holiday.
> (172)

While Amichai's poetry is deeply informed by the cultural and religious consciousness of Judaism, the "homeland trap" is also the "world-trap" of life,
language, and the imagination at the end of the 20th century:

> to speak now in this weary language,
> a language that was torn from its sleep in the Bible:
> [dazzled,
> it wobbles from mouth to mouth. In a language that once
> [described
> miracles and God, to say car, bomb, God.
> (57)

On an obvious level, the language is Hebrew. On a more profound level, the language of Israel (like the land itself) is a combat zone between all that is spiritual and mundane, dead and living, historical and contemporary. The spiritual and physical telescope into one another where the "diameter of the bomb" is both "thirty centimeters" and, "in the howl of orphans / . . .reaches up to the throne of God and / beyond . . ."(118). Ultimately, these concentric circles resonate throughout Amichai's work to form a "circle with no end and no God" (ibid): a circle whose center is the Bomb. Unlike the discrete circles

of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, the center of this circle is everywhere.

In his essay, "The Disappearance of the Outside," Andrei Codrescu states that "the Outside has greatly diminished in all its dimensions: geography, imagination, liberty. Transcendence has closed shop, or perhaps the last room in a shop that has been closing since the Renaissance" (194).[2] According to Codrescu, a primary culprit in the disappearance of the outside is the cult of commodity which "has rendered everyone powerless while removing the critique of power to an abstract realm hard to connect with the (otherwise busy) senses" (DO 195).

In America the last room open in the shop of Transcendence may well be in the hands of comedians. Arguably, America's greatest philosophers have been comedians whose wit and candor (by virtue of their masks and "outsider" status) possess more critical acumen than the abstract shticks of academics, politicians and religious leaders combined.

Over the past few decades, Codrescu has become one of the ringleaders of comedic (i.e., satirical) American poetry. Although his social commentary is often gloomy and sardonic, *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970-1995* reads like a purposeful Chaplin wrench wedged in among Western culture's gnashing gears of tragedy and comedy.

Alien Candor includes most of the material from the earlier, Sun Press *Selected Poems* (expanding the 1970-1980 collection by approximately 50 pages), as well as 100+ pages of work from the past 15 years. Moving from the early "personae poems" (written from the perspectives of an ex-beatnik, a Dominican monk, etc.) through the recent work, one is able to chart Codrescu's deepening relationship with both the English language and American culture. Indeed, Codrescu's creolization of styles—New York School, Beat, Dada, and surrealism—makes his poetry patently "American," despite his self-stylized outsider perspective. Perhaps this reinforces Codrescu's notion of the Outside's disappearance, or that "America" cannot be defined by simple inside/outside dichotomies.

Codrescu is willing to take risks with language and include the banal ("a boiled hotdog,"), the pop icon ("the Lone Ranger") and the trivial anecdote alongside speculations on culture, language and capitalism, pointing up the fact that "the dump" is part of the package-deal. To include the banal, iconic, and anecdotal is to risk adding the poem itself to the trash-heap. While it's doubtful whether poetry ever "redeems" the trash-heap, it is Codrescu's hovering over these objects, images, and anecdotes in poems such as "3/6/81, Amtrak" and

"Not a Pot to Piss In (My Life as a Pot)" that turns "the Outside" back in. At the end of the "Amtrak" ride:

> . . .I note that everyone who is not going
> to Chicago stands now, and they are wearing thick
> belts painted with the Stations of the Cross. Silos.
> Rich pastures. Silence. The fat Yugoslav conductor
> steps forward with a radio, and the fat setting sun
> blares forth from it. Beauty, it blurts, hurts. Beauty
> hurts because it's subject to instant nostalgia.
>
> (246)

Duncan probably didn't have Codrescu's "dream shit pits of the race" in mind when he called for a symposium of the whole. But *Alien Candor* reminds us that these "shit pits" are part of the picture. If society is "the product of rejection," then the job of the poet is to recover *all* that is rejected, "to be an ontological reminder, a real pain in the / ass, reminding everyone why we took up the pen / in the first place, to scratch ourselves on the wall / or under the aching arm / to kick open the lid . . ." (239).

Ed Sanders' most recent sleuth-work is *Chekov*, a "verse biography" of the Russian writer and doctor that's skillfully braided into the larger, looming contexts of pre-Revolutionary Russia and Europe. Using his "tracking" method of Investigative Poetry, Sanders consulted over fifty books on and by Chekov, as well as works on pre-Revolutionary Russia and Europe, pogroms, and anti-Semitism. What began as a study for a musical drama on Chekov's life ended up as a book-length poem, a "hipstory" set to meter, studded with illustrations, maps, Saxon assonance, and funky rev-chants:

> They learned the Primal Secret
> of rev-work:
> that secret presses
> flambent fliers
> and inky exhortations
> did not enter the lives
> of the bent-down masses
>
> so they decided to
> "go among the people"
> (idti v narod)
>
> (70)

The poem is a fascinating example of the potentially infinite labyrinth of material that the selection and combination of "data clusters" can generate. Sanders' careful juxtapositions of biographies, histories, and politics, as well as his ear for rhythm and meter, create thoughtful tensions between the personal and the political. Like Sanders' own involvement with both politics and art, *Chekov* narrows the gap between revolutionary art (Chekov: "In '85 / he published 129 stories and sketches") and the art of revolution (*Chekov*: "In 1885 was the first mass strike in Russia . . .") (94). And in an age of increasing government censorship and decreasing government funding of the arts, the resemblance between 19th century Russia and 20th century America is spooky.

Also helping to narrow the gap between art and politics is the young Lenin who lurks in the wings of the poem, reading Chekov's "Ward #6" and organizing the Bolshevik party. Although Chekov never lived to see the 1917 Revolution, Sanders' portrayal of him as both writer- and doctor-of-the-people makes a strong case for his role in inciting the proletariat uprising.

Sanders' research also draws attention to gaps in the official Chekov canon. Since the Russian censors scrutinized everything Chekov wrote, manuscripts were altered, expurgated, and possibly destroyed by the writer himself. Hopefully, Sanders' calling attention to these gaps and missing manuscripts will initiate further research in the "post-Sov archives."

—DAN FEATHERSTON

Notes:

1 Joseph Cohen, *Voices of Israel: Essays on and Interviews with Yehuda Amichai, A.B. Yehoshua, T. Carmi, Aharon Appelfeld, Amos Oz* (SUNY Press, 1990).

2 Andrei Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape* (Addison-Wesley, 1990). Subsequently cited as DO.

The solution came, as they often do, inadvertently. The mystery was the reputation of Elizabeth Bishop. Certainly it's difficult to dislike Bishop: her poems, like Pennsylvania Dutch floor stencils, are meticulous, clever, always pretty and sometimes beautiful, bright. But this does not explain her recent canonization (in the Vatican sense). In many circles—deeply eclipsing the once-reigning princes, Lowell and Berryman—she is considered the major *(the* major) American poet of the Postwar period. It strikes me as inexplicable, a pulse of the zeitgeist I can't find.

But now I get it, thanks to a pamphlet published by the New York Public Library: "Books of the Century." To celebrate its centenary, the NYPL has compiled a list of the 100 most influential books of the century. These are divided into eleven categories: "Protest & Progress," "Nature's Realm," "Economics & Technology," "Women Rise," and so on. Like all such lists, it is ditzy. There are twenty "Landmarks of Modern Literature" from Chekhov to Toni Morrison. Six are poetry: Yeats, Eliot, Lorca, Stein (a surprise, but she does have a statue behind the building), Auden's *Age of Anxiety* (more memorable as title than text), and Edna St. Vincent Millay (still merry on the ferry after all these years). Evidently it was a bad century for poetry.

The oddest category is "Optimism, Joy, Gentility." It includes, among others, Helen Keller's autobiography, Emily Post, P.G. Wodehouse, *Winnie-the-Pooh, The Joy of Cooking,* Tolkein, and the children's book *Goodnight Moon.* At the bottom of the chronological list—the only book in 35 years to bring us optimism, joy, and gentility—is Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems.*

Isn't that it? America is the only country on earth officially dedicated to the "pursuit of happiness." As Reagan proved, things can become terrible and the government can do anything it wants, as long as the populace feels good. Feeling good, not doing good, is the American way. Feeling good even when we're not doing well. [A few years ago, some organization gave a mathematics exam to high school seniors in 30 countries. The American students, not unexpectedly, finished last: only 20% scored an "A". The Koreans came in first: 80% got an "A". What was interesting about this test was that, at the end, there was a true/false question: "I am good at mathematics." 80% of the Americans checked "True," but only 20% of the Koreans.]

Neither as inspirational as Helen Keller, as useful as Irma Rombauer, as witty as Wodehouse, as fanciful as Tolkein, Bishop is indeed the poet of a cheerful gentility. What is telling is that we now mistake—

despite the complete works of Henry James—good manners for greatness. Of all the books on the list, Bishop's *Complete Poems* most resembles *Goodnight Moon* (though I'll take the little mouse any time): something pleasant, but not stupid, for intellectuals to read for a few moments at the end of the harried day, before they nod off into their troubled sleep.

—ELIOT WEINBERGER

HOLLO'S *CORVUS*

Anselm Hollo, *Corvus*, Coffee House Press, 1995. 141 pp, $11.95, (paper)

> *"le plus souvent il s'agit de tristesse"*
> it is mostly a question of sadness
> the trick's to remember
> that *that* is absolutely *no* excuse to be boring
> or humorless or too conveniently absent
>
> *(Small Door At Far End)*

Anselm Hollo's new book of poems, *Corvus*, is as "black" and sleek as the raven it's named for. Hollo, in life, dresses most often in basic black, because that is simplifying, an intense, economical—minimalist—expression of taste. Hollo has said often in conversation, "I am a minimalist": he means no waste, no wake of garbage. The changes in his poetry over a long career have been more of mood and depth than of style, as if what is essential to poetry, once mastered in a suitable style, remains constant (faithful) in that style. The same style, or couple of styles, should do. The same body does, the same mind and the same voice. Hollo's reading voice is one of *the* voices of the poetry times, unforgettably deep and rich, capable of exquisite pacing. It bears no relation to a raven's call whatsoever; it haunts one's reading

of *Corvus*, a book full of resonance across big space and time, big sadness and affection, since one of the things "minimalism" does traditionally is play to the void. Hollo, however, is not inclined to a religion-based exploration of the scale of the cosmos. He is a skeptic, he says in 1991, probably akin to the unnamed "urban ironists" he refers to in *West Is Left On the Map*. The vastness of space-time is seen not as godly but as what gets between the dead and the living, old times and new times, what separates and devours all humans and their cultures, humans and their cultures tending, especially in these times, to hasten the feast. Hollo is not just a cosmopolite: he is an internationalist, one of American poetry's few and so a treasure. The son of Finnish and German parents, he grew up mainly in Finland speaking Finnish, German, and Swedish. He came to America to stay in the late '60s by way of ten or so years in England and has since made much of his living as a translator into English from his childhood languages and from French. Thus *Corvus* is dense with a multiple heritage and with international relationships and interests and a sense of the special loss in time of a past in other countries.

Corvus is prefaced by an "Author's Note" on the title (Hollo's own name means "raven" in Hungarian and Finnish) and concluded by some seven pages of "Notes"—an urban-ironist-"scholar's" framework. In between there are seven sections, most of which have been previously published on their own as chapbooks, the short book being dear to Hollo's minimalist sensibility and part of his process. Presented in roughly chronological order, they are all together a different thing from how they seemed singly; they are now a meditation on time and the times, which Hollo sees as unrelievedly medieval in the word's worst senses, and on Hollo's own past. *1991*, a sequence of untitled poems/pages, is an elegy for the author's sister, Irina Hollo, who died in that year in Finland. The poem is for the most part direct in tone and meaning

> aye. . .past
> this bubble of assumed person
> glassy shapes of the dead *en la noche* drift
> beyond glad or sad
> fugitives
> from all personal referents

But it is interrupted towards the end by a long satirical footnote placing the poem in a mock historical perspective from the point of view of the future. Thus *1991* becomes similar to *Corvus'* second section, *Some Greeks*, a short set of translations from *The Greek*

Anthology mostly on the theme of death. The two sections are made to seem both lost in time and contemporary. *Some Greeks* has a preface, i.e. more scholarly apparatus, which is in the author's personal voice but by its existence hints at the transformation of life into the rustle of the page in the scholar's hand. After *Some Greeks, Blue Ceiling* and *West Is Left On the Map,* are sequences of untitled poem/parts like *1991. Blue Ceiling* is disjunctive and spacy within a sketchy logical structure, framed as the thoughts of a man reading *Harper's* while raccoons try to enter his house. The thinker/reader/writer in the chair—a paradigmatic narrator for much of Hollo's poetry—is entertained by such verbal mental events, as

> when you met him he was a man
> now he is a postage stamp
>
> you can't open the window this is Dallas
>
> "they took my billiard table!"
> Mary Queen of Scots complained in 1576
>
> mice fall from the sky

These startling units point forward; in the book, to the explosively disjunct middle section, *Not a Form at All But a State of Mind. West Is Left On the Map,* which comes after *Blue Ceiling,* is more straightforward, like much of *Corvus* ranging between outcry of prophecy: "and the shades they are a-massing/at the gates of ghostly Troy"; and expression of love: "with you, a thousand years would not be long enough." Time can't be long enough for love but is always long enough for war. Though there are ways of combating time: one can speak to Diogenes the Cynic in a dream; place oneself on record as a witness ("remember Bear's Head who. . .saw/when the flood subsided/only the white man remain"); read a cat-urine-stained book by some late urban ironists.

Not a Form At All But a State of Mind, which is made up of six sequences, is an outburst of multiple voices in the sonnet form. These sonnets' most obvious inspiration is Ted Berrigan's book *The Sonnets,* in their use of quotation of others' and the author's own works, their repetition of lines, their Cubist fragmentation and remassing of fragments into new entities, and their reflection of what Hollo refers to in the footnotes as "aleatory numerical methods of selection." They don't sound at all like Berrigan, except in *Lines From Ted: An Ars Poetica,* a sequence made up of selections from a talk given by Berrigan at The

Naropa Institute in 1982. That sequence stands out as "different," a blasting in of a dead friend's voice, in the midst of, in the surrounding sequences, a swirl of memory, opinion, song, and connection to past others including Hollo's past selves. The section is preceded by, as epigraph, William Carlos Williams' statement that: "The sonnet . . .is not a form at all but a state of mind. It is the. . .dialogue upon which much writing is founded: a statement then a rejoinder of a sort, perhaps a reply, perhaps a variant of the original—but a comeback of one sort or another." For Hollo the point has not been to write sonnets so much as to manifest a sort of consciousness, a mind thinking and remembering, consciousness being dialogic. These fourteen-liners provide an easily replicable container for what is otherwise formless and continuous though patterned. "Mind is shapely," as Allen Ginsberg says; but it isn't shaped like art. Hollo here is using the sonnet to place corners, sides, melody, further patterning on the mind's dense workings so that they can be looked at at all and essences extracted.

The first sonnet sequence, bearing the title of the whole section, is probably the prettiest and most classical. It makes use of material from Lewis Carroll, Robert Creeley, Jack Clarke, Piero Heliczer, Ted Berrigan, Cavalcanti, Joanne Kyger, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edwin Denby, Petrarch, Jouni Inkala, Tom Raworth, Gunnar Harding, and the author:

> underground trees slow darkness
> and fear has lien upon the heart of me
> magpie steals silver spoon it is gone forever
> like the eyeglasses of the less fortunate
>
> in a terrifying gray light from the future
> the carnival continues a place where a sad horde
> of such as love and whom love tortures
> point to the moon and break it

The second sequence, *Small Door At Far End*, only four sonnets long, comments on recent 20th century artistic and critical practices:

> time for your take, you assholes
>
> . . .
>
> a barrage of labyrinthine winks
>
> . . .

and the total Sargasso Sea of signifiers
they do my *research* for me

Next, *Lines From Ted: An Ars Poetica* is not necessarily Hollo's own "ars poetica" but is probably one that Hollo's mind often converses with and does partake of from time to time. Every line in this sequence has Berrigan's stamp:

I sometimes wonder
I sometimes think about how many
[poets
For example those poets in the universities with suitcoats
[on
Some of whose works I like very much nonetheless
How many of them broke their own hearts
Fighting against their own natural tempo and pace
in order to try to write
What was supposedly the right tempo and pace
For English-American literature?

Hollo's line arrangement expertly corresponds to Berrigan's syntactical pace, his delight in making each clause a surprise and in making Byzantine thought processes slowly work themselves out. *Lines From Ted* is an absolutely novel work; uncategorizable as to author; or genre, it slips out of any box one tries to fit it in. And so the sequences proceed, each with a slightly different shape and purpose. *Pterodactyls,* the fourth one, is another short one, viciously political:

we better start digging our foxholes in the fourth
[dimension
& while we dig let us chant We Piss on the Serb Nation
[State
We Piss on the Croat Nation State we piss and shit
on all your godforsaken states

The fifth sonnet sequence, *Villonelles,* is a "translation," a much condensed reworking of an older narrative sequence, *Or, to Hocus the Animals of the Pursuers by Changing Their Dream Cassettes (Old Thibetan Trick).* What was formerly a fifteen-page work in quatrains is now six sonnets, forming a mythic story which refuses to make sense in the way of the medieval past its characters, a dwarf and a queen, hint at; but is "sensible," can be sensed. Its qualities, and drift, are suggested by the sequence's last few lines:

in the world to come everything like it was

in the world that was yet everything quite changed
narratives disjunctive(yet) associative as dreams
poems sonorous replete with handsome words
while lacking all "sense" & "connection"

the future world is sensible chaos chaos squared
or raised to the power of infinity

The final sonnet sequence, *Reviewing the Tape*, is composed entirely of lines from Hollo's earlier large collection, *Sojourner Microcosms: Poems 1959-77*. The words of the past are summoned and shaped into a mysteriously allusive personal narrative of the past, ending with the following lines:

the surface extends all the way out to the core
wherever there is a hole distributed in space
cave equals room equals window

There is no essential difference in substance between surface and core, so the usual perception of them can be reversed. In a context of contemplation of the past, this suggests that what happens and then has happened is a "superficial" narrative, something inside, while the core of the person is the outward one, functioning exactly now. "A hole distributed in space" might be the past, as well as being a room. "Cave" is one's unconscious; "room" is the conscious self; "window" is the world. Everything coincides. And that sort of coincidence is the effect of the sequence and of all the sonnet sequences taken together. Hollo's times and self have been exploded, turned inside out, and made altogether.

Corvus concludes with two ostensible collections of separate titled poems. *High Beam* is an expansion of a shorter chapbook by the same title. There are poems in several manners: the expansively narrative

It was in his house I discovered
the monumentally baffling Ezra Pound
greenish photo of puffy-faced poet
on glossy black cover & his better half Dr. Williams
("Seven Years Short Of a Hundred")

the beautifully *graven*

calligrapher Berrigan
carved the Iowa rain

("Inhabited Eyes")

the broadly satirical

but now
in these
"controlled circumstances"

they had, in fact, *become*
"controlled substances"

("Chicago")

Etc. Five of the twenty-eight poems are about war (The Gulf War and the war in ex-Yugoslavia being within the section's time frame); five more are elegies; many are love poems. The final section of *Corvus, Survival Dancing,* consisting of fourteen poems, is really a sequence, unified in manner, mood, and motion—both broad impulse and pulse. The manner is telegraphic, dense, generally pronounless:

toss coin choose stairs a door with home
black hole of childhood
upholstered in cobblestones
mystery & exactitude of human nostrils

("In the Music Composed by Nutritious Algae")

The whole, with its beautiful title, is dedicated to "Sir Orfeo Joe," a.k.a. Joe Cardarelli, the poet and longtime friend of Hollo's, who died suddenly in 1994. The mood, again, is elegiac, time-conscious, and fearful but rather playfully so. This set, and so the book, ends with two poems which take an unsentimental stand with "art":

art
loves
funny details

therefore is
a dreaming
& yes joy!

elitist
for sure

("& Time Trots By")

yet she'll. . .
do art eat well never please wicked money

always treat language like a dangerous toy

("At Evenfall")

The above last line, the last line of the book, refers to a description by Ed Dorn of the snowy landscape of Finland, in association with Hollo's poetry sensibility: "It is so pure it treats English like a toy" ("afterword" to *Sojourner Microcosms.)* The insertion here of the word "dangerous" is a rather (not entirely) political act, since American English is now the most political, therefore dangerous, language in the world; this change is probably the product of Hollo's meditative compositional process. A minimalist thinks before (and after), as well as while, writing.

In the "author's note" to *Sojourner Microcosms* Hollo states (1977), "more & more i begin to see it all as one continuous poem . . ."; and there is a constancy and continuance to his work since which has born out the truth of that statement. In the same preface he writes, "i seem to average circa 10-20 pages per year," and one suspects that that is still roughly the case (though the lowercase "I" is no longer the case.) Part of Hollo's method is to collect phrases and lines, which he meditates on and joins together: he's the maker of the new object out of selections from what goes on in the inner and outer theaters. A compulsive reader, rather than compulsive writer, he takes in whatever words on whatever surfaces encountered, and he reads the words that get said in conversation as well. Thus, cullings from the world's verbiage, contemporary and past, constitute much of his raw material, which gets mulled over, related to, and in general transformed. He's not a diarist, or a recorder of the timely process of his mind and world. The "one continuous poem" isn't at all linear, because an effect of "fashioning" a poem is to deform the kind of time we've been taught to live in. In "Blue March '91" (in *High Beam)* Hollo states:

the Species invented Time
and probably Space

its function to be their recorder
until the End

but if art is a "dreaming" ("As Time Trots By," quoted earlier), it creates a different time and space as a dream does. That's how a poem is a place where a line lasts. *Corvus,* like all of Hollo's books, contains memorable lines and passages; the book is not a *text,* is much more artistically and spatially alive than that linear word implies with its origins in weaving. One reads Hollo to be in a different kind of time, as well as to make contact with a mature and responsible mind, which is pessimistic about the world and happy to be functioning, and which proposes wisdom, humor, and beauty as reasonable antidotes to evil.

Hollo's style is etched, compressed, and also compositional, meaning that because of the relations between a poem's pieces, the reader is constantly sent back into and all around inside the poem. The poem is never used up. The pieces are definitely pieces; take the following passage from *West Is Left On the Map:*

"dear chords of night: one is not rhymes
but civil fur come to bliss late"

this creature called god
left one no ma

boat sails into sun

west
is left on the map

an endless warble of dreams

The primary unit is the phrase not the word, and the initial, quoted couplet (which I take to be Hollo's, since there's no reference to it in the deliciously fussy note apparatus) is composed of four phrases rather harmoniously at odds with each other. Likewise the next couplet is two startling phrases, and so on, the phrases being units of both meaning and cadence. The meanings are quick and new; the cadences are terse but rich and have space around them, aren't at all jerky. There is also a more narrative manner, as on the page just previous to the above:

the old man reached for a stick but the savage begged him
in the name of all that was sacred
not to hurt this snake

saying it was
one of his gods
so the old man picked up a sturdy branch & killed the
snake
& told the savage:
'when you said to me
that this creature
was your god
you left me no choice but to kill it'

Here there are long lines and shorter phrases together, each quite distinct though the narrative is continuous: each is still a piece, marked by the reader with a curious pleasure that seems to take place in the mouth, even while reading silently. In both passages, there is an exact sense of prosodic unit connected with phrase or line, even though the unit is never consistent. Prosody, of course, is also about time: one may use it to go forward in many different ways. Hollo's way is to hold back while going forward: the future arrives slowly, the past is recalled easily, and the reader feels, in general, in the present.

There is probably nothing special about Hollo's methods, as outlined: there is probably nothing very special about any poet's methods. However, it's difficult to think of anyone who practices the same methods as Hollo, anyone who gets meanings in quite the same way. He doesn't join the disjunct, he doesn't change syntax; rather by being terse, and careful, he brings things together that come to belong together.

wake up
smile in the giddy blue
join in the flash of was

brains still on

("Gods Walked Animals Talked," *Survival Dancing)*

It's the space between "pieces" that's important, different, space meaning a sort of register of the singularity of what's said. In disjunction it's the place where one recognizes that the next unit doesn't "go with" the previous one. Often in contemporary disjunction, the space

between units is a mannerism (not necessarily a pejorative word), an element of design or style. In Hollo's writing, since there's content, such space exists because original thoughts are being uttered. But they're word-thoughts, thoughts that couldn't quite be had apart from the exact words they are. Somewhat the same kind of space exists between the poems or parts of the various chapbook-like sections of *Corvus*, between the sections themselves, and between all of Hollo's books. They—the various parts of the "one continuous thing," Hollo's lifelong poem—are of the same substance but aren't the same. They aren't novel: the aesthetics of novelty can be very wearying and shallow. They're an exact response to what's going on. Hollo's style opens to a large range of subject, since it is at once personal, magisterial, humorous, and serious. It compresses many qualities into the one response, in slow forward motion, with slow jewel-tipped feelers. Hollo's particular mastery of the space in and around the various units involved in the lifelong production of poetry, his particular practice, is probably closest, among contemporaries, to that of Ted Berrigan. Space in a poem is a frame both formal and friendly; it's a person-made tinkering with time. One does not become grandiose about such things; poetics doesn't change the world much, or shouldn't. (Wouldn't it be terrible if a poet actually changed the world's consciousness to be like her/his theory, or poem!) Or, as Hollo says in *Blue Ceiling*, "may you be forever strange."

Finally, if Hollo is an internationalist, what is an international poetry? Sometimes it seems as if every American poet should be asking her/himself that question, as a response both to the United States' continuously imperialistic role in the world in most respects (including poetry) and to the fact of a borderless computer-controlled future. Hollo's poetry is faithful to ethnic region as well as to world, to a childhood in Finland that isn't really lost, and to various localities lived in in the American West. Specific histories don't fade, but one keeps in constant touch, outward. Hollo's poetry, with its huge field of reference, is one possible model for the future. It doesn't list what it knows and consists of: the references are built in. That is, it isn't itself a computerized conglomerate, doesn't spout facts as possession, but it's equal to all that. It could probably handle the future.

—ALICE NOTLEY

Contributor Notes

ERRATA in 39: we apologize to Emily Cheng for misspelling her name, and to Barbara Guest for mis-setting the following lines from her poem, "The Nude," quoted from by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her article on Guest's work (p. 43):

> A severe distance is established between her realism
> and his anxious attempt to define it.
>
> The painter desires the image he has selected
> to be clothed in the absolute silk of his touch,
>
> Lonely himself he has admired the glance
> of kimonos, mirrors, fans and bestowed them on her
>
> . . .
>
> He searches the world to find those spheres
> that will confine the fluid nude,

PHILLIP FOSS has a new book of poems, *Chromatic Defacement,* forthcoming in 1997 from Chax Press. Other books are available from Light & Dust Books, and Lost Roads. CLAYTON ESHLEMAN is writing a book on Upper Paleolithic imagination; Black Sparrow will publish a new collection of his poetry in 1998. ADRIENNE RICH's most recent collection of poetry is *Dark Fields of the Republic* (Norton, 1995). JEROME ROTHENBERG's tenth book from New Directions, *Seedings & Other Poems,* appeared in 1996, along with *Pictures of the Crucifixion* (poems) and *The Book, Spiritual Instrument* (edited with David Guss) from Granary Books. The second volume of *Poems for the Millennium,* compiled with Pierre Joris, is scheduled for later this year. His and Milos Sovak's translations from Vitezslav Nezval will appear shortly from Sun & Moon. Prague-born and Charles University-educated, MILOS SOVAK is a medical researcher and inventor, who lives

in California and since 1972 has been publisher of Ettan Press, for which he designs and produces limited editions of literature and graphics. His interest in poetry goes back to a childhood acquaintance with Vitezslav Nezval, who was a close friend of his father's. *Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain,* an anthology of contemporary Brazilian poetry edited by MICHAEL PALMER, Regis Bonvicino and Nelson Ascher is about to be published by Sun & Moon Press. Palmer's *The Danish Notebook* will appear in the spring of 1997, in a bilingual edition from Borum Vorlag, Copenhagen. His *Selected Poems* is scheduled for the fall of 1997, from New Directions. JOHN OLSON's work most recently appears in the American Book Review and First Intensity. His chapbook, *Swarm of Edges,* was published last October by bec press. KEN CORMIER currently lives in West Newton, MA, with his wife Julie Letendre. He is completing work on a recording project entitled *Bug Dreams.* WANG PING, born in Shanghai, came to New York in 1985. Her poems have appeared in *The Best American Poetry* (1993 and 1996). Coffee House Press published her book of short stories, *American Visa,* in 1994, and her novel, *Foreign Devil,* in 1996. PAMELA WYE will exhibit recent paintings in a group show entitled "The Power of Suggestion" at the Hopper House, Nyack, NY. She has been named Guest Editor for the College Art Association's *Art Journal* issue on "Rethinking Studio Education." ELIOT WEINBERGER' most recent book is *Written Reaction* (Marsilio, 1996). SPENCER SELBY'S most recent book is *No Island* (Drogue Press, 1995), ROBERTO TEJADA has an essay in *Images of the Spirit: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide* (Aperture, 1996). JASON WEISS is currently writing a book on Latin American writers in Paris. PIERRE JORIS' most recent books include *Winnetou Old* (poems), and *Breathturn* by Paul Celan (translation). Another Celan volume, *Threadsuns,* and a collection of his own poems, *Poasis,* are scheduled for 1997 and 1998 respectively. BARBARA GUEST's most recent book of poems is *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* (Post-Apollo Press, 1996). ALICE NOTLEY's latest book, *The Descent of Alette,* was published by Penguin USA in 1996.

KENRO IZU RAISES FUNDS FOR HOSPITAL IN CAMBODIA

Photographer Kenro Izu, who has spent the last 15 years photographing monuments throughout the world, has announced that he will mount a series of exhibitions and sell prints of his images of the Angkor Wat monument to raise $2 million for the construction and operation of a free hospital for children in Cambodia.

In the last three years, Izu has made a total of six trips to Angkor Wat, an 850-year-old temple in a Cambodian jungle. In the course of his work, he's seen hundreds of Cambodian children who've been maimed by land mines left over from the country's civil war, and the situation began to gnaw at him. "I was taking pictures and selling them for a couple thousand dollars each and not giving anything back," he says. "I couldn't justify that. I felt I wanted to return something."

On a long flight home from one of his shoots, Izu says he came up with the idea of building a free hospital for children. Earlier this year, he established Friends Without A Border, a nonprofit organization dedicated to coordinating the project and raising money for it.

Since then, Friends Without A Border has reached an agreement with Cambodia's ministry of health to construct the hospital. The governor of Siem Reap, the city nearest Angkor Wat, has donated land. A temporary facility is already under construction and Izu's goal is to complete a permanent facility within 3 years.

Friends Without A Border is trying to raise $1 million for construction, plus another $500,000 to sustain operations for ten years (the sum is low by western standards, but labor costs are significantly lower in Cambodia, Izu explains). A Japanese company has also agreed to provide medical equipment.

To date, the organization has raised $80,000. The first exhibition of Izu's Angkor photos, at the Museum of Photographic Arts in Kiyosato, Japan, runs through September 29; in October, it will travel throughout Japan. Izu will also exhibit his work at the Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York beginning January 23, 1997, and in September 1997, at the Center of Photography at Woodstock, New York. Other U.S. exhibits are in the works.

Izu will sell platinum and gravure prints of his work for $1,250 each—one-half his usual fee. He also plans to sell postcards, greeting cards and catalogues. In addition, the organization is seeking corporate sponsorships.

Izu, a native of Japan, came to the U.S. to pursue a career in photography in 1971. After a brief stint as an assistant to a fashion photographer, he opened his own studio to photograph jewelry. He began photographing monuments around the world after visiting the Egyptian pyramids in the late 1970s.

For more information about Friends Without a Border, call (212) 254-1002 or send e-mail to <fwab@interport.net>. The organization also has a Web site at <http:// www.users.interport.net/~fwab >.

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--Gary Snyder

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